

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office November 7, 1898, by Frank Tousey.

No. 170.

NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 4, 1901.

Price 5 Cents.

THE RED LEATHER BAG.

A WEIRD STORY OF LAND AND SEA.

By HOWARD AUSTIN.



"Down! Down!" breathed Joe, falling flat upon the ground. Mike grasped a tree and bent forward. Before them, resting upon the moonlit waters of Sequaket Creek, was a small boat, in the stern of which sat an old man, bareheaded, holding in hand a lantern as he bent over the side.

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24 UNION SQUARE, NEW YORK.DIME NOVELS
BOUGHT & SOLD
CHARLES BRAGIN
1525 W. 12th St.
Brooklyn 4, N. Y.

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Complete Stories of Adventure.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office, November 7, 1898. Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1901, in the office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by Frank Tousey, 24 Union Square, New York.

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—OR—

A WEIRD STORY OF LAND AND SEA

By HOWARD AUSTIN

CHAPTER I.

A DECEMBER STORM

The night of the 19th of December, 188—, will live long in the annals of the little fishing village of Sequaket, L. I., as that of the most terrible storm ever known to have visited the "North Shore."

Not that it matters much to the outside world whether the annals of sequaket record this or any other fact.

Few people in the outside world have ever heard of Sequaket, and to such as are better posted in the geography of Long Island it is known only as an insignificant collection of about a dozen houses, situated just beyond that dismal bog "Darling Swamp," which, at a point on the map somewhere near Baiting Hollow, reaches far back into the interior of the island and stretches along the coast for miles.

This is all we are going to tell about Sequaket except to state that its most noted citizen was one Matthew Minnett, an eccentric bachelor who for years had lived alone in the best house in the village, and who on the 19th of December, of the year we didn't mention, lay stretched upon what was supposed to be his dying bed.

There was a nurse with him when the clock struck nine, a poor, half-witted girl taken from the almshouse, and Tom Carleton, and Crafton Wise, cousins and nephews of the dying man, stood facing each other on the opposite sides of a great fire of green logs, which was crackling and sizzling upon the open hearth in the dining-room downstairs.

They had been ordered from the room peremptorily by the dying man, who seemed to be in great mental agony over something connected with his past life, and now stood impatiently awaiting the summons of one or both to return.

Matthew Minnett was believed to be a miser.

In early life he had followed the sea, and when at last he returned to Sequaket to occupy the house of his father's, he came as a battered hulk might return to port after many perilous voyages, with an arm gone, a leg missing and likewise an eye.

Poor enough he claimed to be, but not one of his neighbors believed it, for the reason that he did not work, and when he spent money it was always in foreign gold coins, which gave rise to the story that he had been a very bad man and had brought back fabulous wealth which he kept hidden somewhere about the premises, no one seemed to know exactly where.

This story his two nephews, Tom Carleton and Crafton Wise, believed also.

"Well, I suppose one of us will go out of this house the richer to-morrow," said Crafton Wise, after a long interval of silence, as he stood kicking his heel against the hearthstone. "Which is it going to be, cousin, you or me?"

"It is hard to say," replied Tom Carleton, his eyes fixed upon the fire, watching the leaping flames—Ha! Rachel! How is he now?"

It was the half-witted nurse who thrust her head through the door so suddenly as to give both the young men a decided start.

"He wants you, Mr. Tom."

"Me!" exclaimed Tom Carleton. "What is it? Is Uncle worse?"

"Don't ask me, I can't tell," replied the girl, shaking her unkempt head slowly. "I think he is mad. He has been going on at a fearful rate. Now he's quieter and he has sent for you and says that you must come alone."

"I'll go at once," said Tom, moving toward the door. "Wait for me here, cousin. If I find that he is actually going I will send for you."

"Nonsense!" cried Crafton Wise. "I'm going, and don't you forget it! I don't propose to give you the advantage, Tom Carleton, be very sure of that."

Tom offered no objection, and together the cousins hurried to the upper chamber.

Groaning, tossing, turning, lay the sick man in the upper chamber upon the wretched pallet he called his bed.

At the sight of both his nephews his face grew dark, and, half raising himself he pointed with the skinny fingers of his one remaining hand toward the door.

"I don't want you both!" he shrieked, harshly. "I want only Tom Carleton. Crafton, you get out!"

"But uncle, my right here is as good as Tom's. I——"

"To the mischief with your rights!" roared old Minnett, in a voice strangely powerful for one in his condition. "I've had you both here for a week. I've been watching you, and I know which is the good boy and which is the bad. Get out, Crafton Wise, get out!"

He seized an old Bible which he had, perhaps, been trying to read, for it lay on the spread beside him, and mustering more strength than would have seemed possible, flung it straight at Crafton Wise, taking him across the head.

With his eyes blazing, the young man turned on his heel and passed through the door.

"Beware, cousin!" he hissed as he departed. "If you don't share with me it will be the worse for you, now mind!"

"Listen!" gasped the old sailor the moment the door closed behind him. "Don't deceive yourself, Tom, and don't waste a moment trying to deceive me. You are a good lad. I've been watching you. I'm dying. There is no help for me. The powder flashes in the pan, but it flashes for the last time—for the last time—the last time! They say I'm a miser. They lie. I am poor, but I have a secret, and I can make you rich; ay, rich beyond your wildest dreams. Why didn't I make myself rich, you ask? Because it takes money to do it. I had none, or, at least, not enough. I am a wreck, a battered wreck. Now waste no time once I am gone. Go to the long closet under the eaves and there, hanging on a nail close beside the window, you'll find a red leather hunting-bag. That contains the secret—the key is under my pillow—millions, boy, millions! Ha, ha, ha! I'm a pirate! A pirate! Hear them shriek for mercy! At 'em boys, at 'em! Cut 'em down! Spare nobody! The gold! The gold! The gold!"

He fell back suddenly and ceased to speak.

He was dead!

Yes, dead, and with an expression of such ferocity upon his distorted countenance that Tom shuddered as he ~~razed~~ ^{glazed}.

A pirate! An assassin of the seas! A man possessed of a secret which concerned millions of ill-gotten gold!

Tom, reaching underneath the pillow, with a shudder, drew forth a common brass key.

"I may as well get the bag at once and have done with it," he thought.

He moved toward the door and opened it, half expecting to find Crafton Wise lurking in the hall.

He was not there.

Off at one side across the passage was the door of the long closet extending under the eaves of the old house to which his uncle had made repeated allusions during this, the last week of his life.

He returned to the death-chamber, and taking up the flickering lamp moved toward the closet door.

The key fitted the lock and turned easily.

Flinging back the door, Tom found himself peering into a perfect rubbish hole filled with baskets, barrels, bottles, old boots, hats and "plunder" of every sort.

Close beside a little window, consisting of two panes only, and one of those broken, hung an old hunting-bag of red leather, suspended to a nail.

Tom moved forward, shielding the lamp from the draught, and in an instant more would have possessed himself of the red leather bag, when suddenly a hand was thrust through the window from without, which seized the bag and drew it through the broken pane.

For a moment Tom Carleton faltered.

Then summoning courage he moved forward, and, bending down, peered through the broken pane.

Outside, leaning against the house, was a ladder which he knew must have just been placed there since nightfall, but no sign of a human being was to be seen.

CHAPTER II.

A SUSPICIOUS CASE INTRUSTED TO OLD KING BRADY,

"You are Old King Brady?"

"At your service, sir; and you, I take it, are Mr. Peter Soulard, president of the Eagle Life Insurance Company."

The month was October. The day somewhere between the first and the tenth.

As for the year, it is sufficient to state that it was the one following the death of Mathew Minnett, the miser of Sequaket, and the night of the singular disappearance of the red leather bag.

President Soulard looked at his distinguished visitor curiously.

"I sent for you, Mr. Brady," he said, by way of leading up to his business, after a moment's pause.

"So I understand it, Mr. Soulard. How can I serve you?"

"You can serve me in a most important matter. You read the newspapers, no doubt, and consequently must have read of the case of Nicholas Nodine."

"It is true. I have attentively read the published accounts relating to the case of Nicholas Nodine."

"Good. Have you formed any opinion?"

"You question me as though I were being examined for a jury," replied the old detective, with one of his well-known smiles. "Yes, I have formed an opinion, Mr. Soulard."

"May I ask what it is?"

"My opinion is that Nicholas Nodine is no more dead than I am."

"Good! good! You are the very man we want. Now look here, Mr. Brady, we can afford to pay for the best detective talent in this business. I want you to take hold at once and prove the truth of those words."

"Let us understand the situation first," replied the detective. "I am going to state the case as I understand it. Correct me if I am wrong."

"Nicholas Nodine, a young man whose antecedents nobody seems to know, suddenly appeared in New York last April as the partner of one Joe Blackwell, a member of the Mining Exchange."

"He attracted no attention until about three months later when, as is believed, he died, and it was discovered that his life had been insured for \$100,000 in various companies, all the policies having been taken out within the year."

"Even then, perhaps, he would not have come before the public had it not been for the fact that the insurance was all in favor of Joe Blackwell, his partner, a young man of tarnished reputation, and——"

"And," interrupted Mr. Soulard, "for the singular directions which he left concerning the disposal of his remains."

"Precisely. And those directions were?"

"That they be taken to a place called Sequaket, on the north shore of Long Island, and sunk in a creek in the midst of a dismal swamp."

"Which was done," continued Old King Brady, calmly, "and done so hurriedly that few beside Joe Blackwell and the physician in attendance seems to have had an opportunity of viewing the body at all."

"That's it. That's precisely it," said the insurance president. "Now let me add that several of the companies foolishly paid their policies. The Great Universal Cosmopolitan is one of these. Others have refused to pay. We are one of the others, and now, Mr. Brady, what we want of you is to follow up Joe Blackwell, to sift this mystery to the bottom, to save us ten thousand dollars if you can."

"Very good," replied the detective. "I'll do it. Rely upon it, Mr. Soulard, you shall know the truth. I shall not fail!"

* * * * *

"A ticket for Sequaket, please."

Old King Brady was first on the line when the ticket-seller raised his window in the little office of the station of the Long Island Railroad at Hunter's Point.

It was the day following the interview between Old King Brady and the president of the Eagle Life Insurance Company, and the detective had already accomplished much.

First he had learned that the business of Mr. Joe Blackwell was in a most precarious condition and seemingly had not been bolstered up to the extent of one penny of the many thousands of dollars which that gentleman had received from the different insurance companies on the policies taken out by Nicholas Nodine.

Next he had learned that Mr. Blackwell found frequent occasion to visit Sequaket, and upon looking into the matter more closely, discovered that he was absent from the city just then, and had been absent for several days.

"A ticket for Sequaket, please."

"Why, I just gave it to you," said the ticket-seller, looking curiously at Old King Brady, who was in the act of picking up his change.

"I did not speak, sir," answered the detective, stepping to one side.

A little man, wearing a soft hat and a very short coat of rusty brown, stepped from behind him up to the window.

"Ah, Mr. Brady! Delighted to meet you!" he exclaimed, extending his hand, familiarly. "It was I who asked for the ticket to Sequaket. So we are to be fellow-passengers, it seems. Ha! ha! how fortunate. You recollect me? My name's Phineas Phipps. I'll give myself the pleasure of talking you into a policy in the Great Universal Cosmopolitan Life Insurance Company on the way down."

CHAPTER III.

THE RED LEATHER BAG TURNS UP AGAIN.

Raising his foot, Tom Carleton struck the little window a blow which sent the glass, and a good portion of the sash with it, flying out into the storm.

Then, without the slightest hesitation, he set down the lamp and crawled through the opening out upon the ladder and ran nimbly to the ground.

There were footprints in the snow leading to and from the ladder, though he could see them but dimly among the whirling flakes, and it was entirely impossible to tell which was which.

"Stop there! I see you! One step more and I fire!" shouted the young man, with all the energy he could muster.

It was then that Tom caught sight of a dark figure running beyond the little grove of trees which skirted the grounds surrounding the house of Matthew Minnett on the side which bordered Darling's Swamp.

Was it all a vision, due to his excited imagination?

At the time, Tom Carleton thought so, for just then a gust fiercer than any which had preceded it struck him, whirling the snow in his face and well nigh taking him off his feet.

When he looked again the man was not to be seen anywhere, and what is more, the footprints ended abruptly in front of a little mound a good ten yards from the edge of the swamp.

"I must see Crafton and get his help," thought Tom, after an unavailing search of several minutes.

He hurried back to the house and entered the dining-room.

Upstairs in the chamber lay the dead man, locked in the still deeper sleep of death; but Crafton Wise was nowhere to be found.

Of course, it was he who stole the bag. He had listened at the door and heard everything. It was all plain now.

The next morning, when Tom discovered that the mound alongside which the man had disappeared was nothing but an overturned wagon-body, and that there were marks of a man's body in the snow beneath it, he felt sure of this, as he might well be.

But of what value the discovery?

It is true that when the neighbors came they found a will executed by Matthew Minnett, leaving Tom the place and about a hundred dollars in foreign gold pieces, which were discovered in the toe of an old stocking.

The place was valueless for lack of a purchaser, and would not have brought five hundred dollars, even could a purchaser have been found.

Time passed, and with it all hopes of ever learning the secret of the red leather bag passed from Tom Carleton's thoughts.

* * * * *

"How far is it to Sequaket?" said the farmer. "Reckon you're a stranger in these parts, young man. It's about three miles or three and a half, I guess. Your road lies straight before you, over the ridge through the middle of Darling Swamp."

"Thank you," replied the questioner. Gloomily he pushed on toward a straggling growth of pine and scrubby alders which skirted the road just beyond the farmer's dwelling. Reaching the bushes, Tom lay down for a few minutes' rest.

Of course, it was Tom Carleton.

It needs neither priest nor prophet to tell us that.

And right here let us explain the young man's situation, and then hurry on to certain startling events.

Tom was the son of Matthew Minnett's sister Susan, while Crafton Wise bore the same relation to his sister Jane.

Both young men were orphans at the time they had been summoned to their uncle's dying bed.

Tom's father had once been in comfortable circumstances, and at his death had left a fund to provide for the education of his son.

Thus it happened that Tom was a Harvard graduate, but to graduate from college without money leaves one but a sorry chance for future advancement, indeed.

So far Tom's life had been a failure.

He had tried his hand at a dozen things, but had succeeded in none.

If Tom Carleton had kept to the road, all that came to pass subsequently might never have happened at all.

Scarcely had he sunk down among the bushes than a man's footsteps could be heard rapidly approaching, and behind him was heard the trotting of a horse.

The horse continued to advance nearer and nearer, and presently came abreast of the spot where Tom Carleton lay.

Without changing his position, Tom could see both horse and rider plainly.

The latter he now perceived to be an elderly gentleman, dressed in a blue coat and wearing a broad-brimmed hat of white felt; a hunting-bag was slung about his back.

Now, had Tom Carleton been as well posted as was Mr. Phineas Phipps, the agent of the Great Universal Cosmopolitan Insurance Co., he would have recognized in the elderly rider no less a person than the world-famed detective, Old King Brady.

But Tom's attention was not suffered to dwell upon the old gentleman long enough to think much about him, for at the same instant he saw a man shoot out of the bushes on the opposite side of the road—a man wearing a soft hat and a very short, brown coat. Like a snake, he seemed to glide over the ground after the horse and rider.

By the light of the moon, which broke through the cloud banks in the western sky at the same instant, Tom saw, to his horror, that the man's hand covered a sizable stone.

This was just as the old gentleman on the horse came opposite to his hiding place.

In fact, so near was the horse, that Tom, by stretching out his hand might have touched his legs, when all in an instant and before the boy could utter a cry of warning, whizz! went the stone through the air, striking the rider full in the head.

As the old gentleman fell backward with a groan, his hat

dropping to the ground, his assailant flung at the horse another stone, which sent him flying down the road.

At the same moment the rider struck the ground with a thud and something—for the instant he hardly knew what—flew among the bushes, striking Tom Carleton on the face.

Tom sprang to his feet and into the road, uttering a loud shout.

As he did so the man who had flung the stone made one wild dive into the bushes and disappeared.

Then, and not until then, did Tom Carleton discover that the object which had fallen upon him, and which he now grasped in his left hand, was not only a hunting-bag, but was made of red leather, and was for all the world the counterpart of the bag stolen on the night of the storm, by the hand of Crafton Wise, thrust through the broken pane in the window of the long closet under the eaves.

The red leather bag!

CHAPTER IV.

THE HUT IN THE SWAMP.

"Phipps—Phipps," repeated Old King Brady, reflectively; "I cannot recall that I enjoy the acquaintance of any one by the name of Phipps."

"Not Fips—F-i-p-s," replied the agent for the Great Universal Cosmopolitan, glibly, as he picked up his ticket for Sequaket from the ticket-seller's shelf. "Not Fips—F-i-p-s, my dear sir, by no means, I assure you; but Phipps, with a h'i, a h'ess and haitch and three p's."

"Evidently you are an Englishman, Mr. Phipps?"

"Evidently I h'am, sir. A true-born Briton, who never, never, never will be a slave. You understand? That's only a quotation from either Shakespeare, Milton or 'Baxter's Brands Plucked From the Burning'—I've forgotten which, but it must 'ave been one or t'other, for it hain't from the Bible; and, besides that, them 'ere is the only books we 'ad in the 'ouse."

"Indeed!" replied Old King Brady, glancing at his watch. "Certainly your conversation is highly entertaining, Mr. Phipps, but I don't recollect ever meeting you before, and there is no use pretending I do."

"Don't want to know me. Spit it right out, man. You can't offend me. Stop a bit. I'll refresh your memory. Called on you in your h'office a dozen times to get you to take h'out a policy in the Great Universal Cosmopolitan. Capital any number of millions you like to mention; policies issued on the endowment, tontine, paid up, annuity or any other plan under the sun. Not forfeitable, fire-proof, water-proof—bless my soul, the man has gone!"

The bell had sounded and the gate opened, and Old King Brady, turning his back squarely on the chattering insurance agent, walked straight through and boarded the train.

"The man is trying to work me," was his thought. "I don't know him, but he does know me. What does it mean? Why does he try to fasten himself upon me? Above all, how happens it that he is bound for Sequaket on the same train with myself?"

Taking from his pocket a small memorandum book the detective hastily consulted a list of the insurance companies which had paid their policies on the life of Nicholas Nodine, and also of those which had not.

The Great Universal Cosmopolitan was among the latter.

"Humph! That's the way the cat jumps, is it?" thought Old King Brady. "Can this fellow be a detective? I cannot place him among the hundreds that I know. If he comes at me again I must cultivate his acquaintance. I was foolish to give him the cold shoulder. Ha! here he comes now."

Mr. Phipps had just entered the door at the front end of the car.

He shot one hasty glance ahead of him, and seeing Old King Brady, walked directly toward him and took a seat by his side.

"Ah, so you were saving a seat for me, were you?" he said, in a most affable manner imaginable. "Thanks, many thanks. 'Tis a long ride to Sequaket. We shall have plenty of time to talk over the matter of that policy, and before we reach our journey's h'end I 'ope to 'ave the pleasure of filling up an h'application blank. You see, our policies are all non-forfeitable, and——"

"Stop," said Old King Brady, extending his hand. "One moment, Mr. Phipps."

"I beg your pardon."

"I have no use for a policy in your company, sir. I have three already, and have no heirs except my son, who will inherit at my death more money than he can spend."

"Oh, then probably I can't capture you?"

"I fear not."

Just then the train pulled out of the station, and Mr. Phipps, seeming to take the hint, began to rattle away about something else.

It was a toss-up which could rattle the loudest, Mr. Phineas Phipps or the smoking car of the Long Island Road.

Both were still rattling when the train reached Sequaket late in the afternoon, and Old King Brady, though employing every art of which he was master, knew no more of Mr. Phipps' business than when they had left Hunter's Point.

"How shall I get rid of him?" was his thought as he stepped from the cars at the Sequaket station. "I don't want him and I won't have him. I've neither the time nor the disposition to follow him, though just as like as not he intends to follow me."

But Mr. Phipps saved him the trouble of further deliberation.

"Excuse me, I've some important business to attend to, Mr. Brady," he said, extending his hand in the most genial manner.

Then, when Old King Brady had shaken it, he turned and walked off down the road.

Already Old King Brady had altered his mind and resolved that the business of the afternoon should be to follow Mr. Phineas Phipps.

Ten minutes later and the station agent saw the tall figure of the detective, mounted upon a horse hired from the village livery stable, ride off on the road which led through Darling's Swamp.

Decidedly, Old King Brady was out of humor.

He had rejected the man's overtures where he ought to have accepted them; he had tried to draw him out, and had failed; and, above all, just where he ought to have stuck close to him, he had allowed him to go off by himself.

Yet somehow Old King Brady could not bring himself to regard Mr. Phipps in the light of a crook.

He had set him down simply for an impudent, prying Englishman, and from the beginning of his long career until now the old detective's judgment of human nature had been seldom found at fault.

And Old King Brady rode on.

On through the damp, foul-smelling marshes, through the bayberry, scrub oak and stunted pines.

Where was he going?

He did not know himself.

There was no trace of Mr. Phipps.

It began to look very much as if he had undertaken a wild goose chase.

Such was Old King Brady's frame of mind when he suddenly perceived at a little distance ahead of him a narrow path leading off among the scrub oaks to the right.

Instantly the detective alighted, and hitching his horse to a tree, walked to the entrance of the path.

Here the ground was softer and covered, beneath the trees, with a heavy growth of moss.

The moss covered the path also in places and impressed upon it, Old King Brady could plainly see, footprints pointing in both directions.

Some seemed fresh, others less so.

Were any of them the prints of the feet of Mr. Phineas Phipps?

"Here's something tangible at last," muttered the detective as he entered the path and strode among the trees.

The path grew wider as he advanced, and it soon became evident that the freshest of the footprints were those heading in the direction he had chosen.

Therefore, Old King Brady was not at all surprised when presently he came to a point where the path suddenly terminated at the entrance to a sort of clearing, in the centre of which stood a small hut.

He had expected something of this sort, and when all at once his ears were greeted by a quick step behind him, he turned and saw something else that he had expected.

It was the broad and smiling countenance of Mr. Phineas Phipps.

CHAPTER V.

OLD KING BRADY ATTACKED ON THE SEQUAKET ROAD.

"You are a detective!"

Uttering these words, Old King Brady stood facing Mr. Phipps at the edge of the clearing, in the waning light of the dying day.

"No, I'm not."

"I say you are."

"If I were not a gentleman I should say you lied. I always wanted to be a detective, and had I been one would have taken Old King Brady for my model, but I never had the courage to begin."

"What are you doing here?"

"I don't know that I'm obliged to answer. I might ask why you have dogged my steps?"

"I am here on business. Probably you know its nature without being told."

"I can guess. You are seeking to learn the truth in the matter of Nicholas Nodine."

"I shall not deny it."

"What company are you working for?"

"None of your business."

"Brief and to the point. Now ask me a question and we'll try and be more polite."

Old King Brady could have stamped his foot with vexation.

"I'll try the blarney on him," he thought. "Fate has thrown us together and until I find out who the fellow actually is and what he is up to, absolutely nothing can be done."

He advanced toward Mr. Phipps with extended hand.

"Look here, I was too hasty," he said, with one of his peculiar smiles. "I confess that I came to Sequaket in the matter of Nicholas Nodine, and if they tell me the truth down in the town, you have been ahead of me by at least two weeks."

"You are right," replied the other, receiving the proffered hand. "Let me meet you half way. There is no mystery about me—not the slightest. I am simply Phin Phipps, agent for the Great Universal Cosmopolitan. My company hasn't paid, and if I can 'elp it it hain't a-goin' to. I'm down here to find out whether Nodine is actually dead or not."

"Then you are a detective?"

"No, I am not. At least not a regular professional. I'm h'acting for this h'occasion h'only, as the play bills 'ave it, and I consider myself mighty lucky to 'ave the assistance of Old King Brady. Is it to be h'enemies or friends?"

"Friends, decidedly. I'm willing to help you, and you must help me. I suppose we are both working for a reward?"

"I suppose we are."

"Very good. Let us help each other earn it. Now, then, what do you know?"

Taking Old King Brady's arm, Mr. Phipps drew him back into the shadow of the trees.

"Do you see that hut?" he asked, pointing.

"I do."

"That's where Blackwell goes when he comes to Sequaket. You understand?"

"I understand that he has never been in Sequaket."

"That's because he gets out at a station below 'ere, and comes up through the swamp. I followed 'im once and I know. The creek where they sank the coffin is right over there."

"Come on, then. I'm going," said Old King Brady, boldly.

"No, no; I'm afraid."

"Pshaw, man! I'm armed, and so I make no doubt you are."

"No, I hain't either. Never shot off a gun or a pistol in my life. Couldn't kill a chicken if I tried."

"Then wait here. I'll be back in a moment or two. I'm going to see the inside of that hut."

"I won't stir a step till you come back, and if I see or hear any one coming rely upon me to give you the whistle in time."

Leaving Mr. Phipps among the trees, Old King Brady moved toward the hut and tried the door, which yielded to his touch.

Entering, he found himself within a small apartment so littered with goods of various sorts as to leave scarce a square inch of floor space to spare.

There were boxes, barrels and hampers. In the centre of the room was a deal table, a cheap cot-bed occupied one corner, and there were several chairs.

There was but one room to the hut and Old King Brady found no difficulty in determining that he was alone in it.

He moved about, examining one article after another. Each package bore the name of Joseph Blackwell and the address of the station below Sequaket on the Long Island Road.

Was Nicholas Nodine dead or alive?

"I'll go back to Phipps," thought Old King Brady, and he was in the act of moving toward the door when all at once

his eyes rested upon a red leather hunting-bag which hung against the wall, suspended from a nail.

The bag was an ordinary affair; the leather was old and rusty, and stamped upon it in gilt letters was a name which Old King Brady could not remember to have heard before.

It was "Matthew Minnett."

Old King Brady opened the bag and found it stuffed full of letters and papers.

"I must look into this," he muttered, "and as I am liable to be disturbed at any moment by the owner of all this plunder, it will be better to do it in the woods. If the letters do not concern the case I shall return them; if otherwise, why then they are my lawful game."

Slinging the bag across his shoulder, he hurriedly went out of the hut and returned to the place where he had left Mr. Phipps.

To his surprise the man was not there.

For a few moments Old King Brady remained hesitating.

It was growing darker with each succeeding moment. Though he listened attentively he could not hear a sound.

"Hello, there! Where are you?" he called, presently.

No answer.

"Phipps! Phipps!"

Still no answer.

"Perhaps he's taken alarm at something and gone back to the road," thought Old King Brady. "Be it as it may I shall stay at Sequaket to-night and pay a second visit to this place to-morrow."

And he hurried along the path.

No sooner was his back turned than a man's face might have been seen protruding from the bushes.

As Old King Brady's tall figure disappeared along the windings of the path the man crept out from the bushes and stealthily followed on.

Certainly, he resembled the insurance agent as he glided like a snake among the trees.

But Old King Brady heard nothing and consequently saw nothing.

Reaching the place where he had tied his horse and seeing nothing of Mr. Phipps, he mounted and turning the animal toward Sequaket slowly moved in the direction by which he had come.

Deeply musing over the events of the past few hours, Old King Brady rode on through the gloaming, when suddenly something struck him sharply on the back of the head.

With a deep groan the detective fell backward to the road.

CHAPTER VI.

FOUND IN THE SEQUAKET CREEK.

"Do you feel better?"

"I—I think so. My head aches sadly. Something struck me. I—young man, who are you?"

Stretched upon the ground, within a rude hut of boughs, lay Old King Brady.

Over him bent Tom Carleton, in the act of pressing a tin cup containing water to his lips.

"I found you lying in the road. Indeed, I saw the scoundrel who attacked you. At my approach he ran. Perhaps I should have chased him, but thinking you needed all the attention I could give you, I brought you here."

"What is your name?"

"Tom Carleton."

"Can you describe the man who threw the stone?"

"It was too dark to see his face. He wore a soft hat and a short, brown coat."

"Phipps, the scoundrel!" exclaimed Old King Brady, springing to his feet. "I'm a fool. Which way did he go?"

"He's gone too long now for you to hope to catch him. Hadn't you better sit down again? Your face is as white as a sheet."

"No, no. I'm all right. There was a bag—a red leather bag. Did he get it?"

Tom Carleton silently pointed to the red leather bag which was slung at his back.

"Good. I owe you a great deal more than I can tell, young man. Give me the bag. Where is my horse, do you know?"

"Your horse ran away, sir," replied Tom, slowly. "As for the bag, I propose to keep it. 'It is mine!'"

Old King Brady stared.

There was a lantern burning dimly upon a rude shelf in one corner of the hut, and by its light he became aware that he was looking into as honest a face as he had ever seen.

Phipps was a scoundrel. Phipps had sought to kill him, but he had not accomplished his evil purpose nor had he

secured the bag. With this young man who claimed to be its owner, it was clearly necessary to come to an understanding at once.

Quick to think, and quicker to act, in a brief space, Old King Brady had accomplished this.

He at once made known his name and position to Tom Carleton, and without betraying his business, by a few searching questions, drew from him the story of the red leather bag.

The more he talked with Tom the better he liked him, and at last he told his own story and described how he had come into possession of the bag.

Tom listened, with wide open eyes.

"I can't understand it," he said, in a puzzled way. "This is certainly Uncle Matt's old hunting-bag, for here is his name stamped upon it as you see."

"There can be no doubt of it," replied Old King Brady, quietly. "No more doubt of it than that one of the scoundrels connected with this strange affair is your cousin Crafton Wise."

"Do you think so?"

"Let us examine the papers in the bag," said Old King Brady, shortly. "When that is accomplished we may be wiser than we are now."

They went to the shelf and upon it spread out the letters taken from the bag.

Though Tom searched thoroughly, even to turning the bag upside down and shaking it, nothing was discovered but a mass of extracts from some book relating to Nicholas Nodine.

One by one Old King Brady opened the letters and glanced over the contents by the light of the lantern.

Some were business letters—some were love letters. Not a few were signed "Joe Blackwell," and bore covert references to some mysterious "scheme."

Presently Old King Brady opened one letter in a plain, yellow envelope, as he glanced at the date, giving vent to an exclamation of joy.

He had found that for which he had come out to seek at last.

The letter was very brief, and was signed simply "Joe." It read:

"Dear Nick—I've got the schooner engaged, and am only waiting the insurance companies to cash in to complete the trade. Her name is the Raven, and she is a regular beauty. I'm sure you'll like her, and am anxious to have you see her; but you must lie low or spoil it all. Won't we have a high old time when we capture old Matt Minnett's treasure? Oh, I guess yes! We'll make the feathers fly! I'll see you paid for all the trouble you've been put to. Meanwhile keep dark, and don't forget that you are buried five feet due northeast from the black stake, deep in the mud of Sequaket creek. Joe."

Old King Brady folded up the letter and thrust it into his pocket with a feeling of triumph he could ill conceal.

"You've told me the truth, young man," he said. "The name of Matthew Minnett is mixed up in this business; my triumph, if not your fortune, has come from out of the red leather bag."

* * * * *

"Joe! Joe!"

"Hello! Is that you, Nick?"

Out from the bushes behind the hut in which Old King Brady had found the red leather bag crept a young man of crafty, malevolent appearance, in response to the call.

"Not a waste word! Not a moment!" gasped the man who had come dashing up to the hut. "Joe, you'll never guess who the fellow was."

"Who?" whispered the other. "Speak up, man. What do you mean?"

"It is Old King Brady!"

"Old King Brady! You cannot mean it. But you say is—don't you mean was?"

"No, I don't," replied the man addressed as Nick, with a fierce imprecation. "I slugged him, but I didn't kill him, worse luck."

"But you captured the bag?"

"Captured nothing. A meddlesome fool interfered with me, picked up the bag and lugged the old duffer into the berrypickers' hut alongside the road. Joe, listen: He's been reading your letters. He and the other fellow have gone fishing in Sequaket creek. I've been listening outside for hut."

"Man, you must be crazy! It is night. There is no boat."

"They've got the berry-pickers' lantern; they've got a rope out of the hut, and, above all, they've got our boat, which, like an idiot, I left down at the creek. Joe, it ain't so much what they may find in the creek that I'm afraid of, though that's serious enough, God knows. Suppose Old King Brady takes a notion to row down to the Sound, why, then——"

"Why, then he'll never live to get there!" hissed the other, springing toward the hut. "Confound you, Nick, why in the name of all that's evil didn't you finish your job?"

Dashing into the hut, he presently returned carrying two revolvers. Tossing one to his companion, he thrust the other into his hip-pocket and struck off boldly through the wooded swamp.

As they stole on, the moon broke from among the thick clouds which lay along the horizon.

The sound of suppressed voices could be heard, and now and then a splash, indicating that water was near.

Suddenly they emerged from the thicket, and the creek lay before them. And all in a moment they understood that for one of the happenings they sought to prevent, they had arrived too late.

"Down! Down!" breathed Joe, falling flat upon the ground.

Nick grasped a tree and bent forward.

Before them, resting upon the moonlit water of Sequaket creek, was a small boat, in the stern of which sat an old man, bareheaded, holding in his hand a lantern as he bent over the side.

"It is Old King Brady!"

"And no mistake about it. The other is Tom Carleton! I might have known it. Unless I've forgotten how to aim a pistol, they'd better say their prayers, for as sure as there is a heaven above us I'm going to send them both to keep company with that coffin in the mud at the bottom of Sequaket creek!"

CHAPTER VII.

"LET THEM LIVE; IT IS FATE."

"Plague take it, the thing missed fire!"

"Try it again. It's not likely to miss twice."

"May the fiends fly away with it, but it has, though. Thunder! That makes miss number three!"

"Here, take mine," whispered Nick, passing his revolver to Joe.

He took the revolver, and, surveying it gloomily, dropped flat upon his stomach again, Nick crouching beside him on the damp ground.

Here, for many moments, they lay watching Old King Brady and Tom Carleton in the boat, as two wild beasts might watch their prey.

Had they arrived sooner they might have seen Old King Brady fish up an old coat when first he began prodding the mud about the black stake in search for the coffin of Nicholas Nodine, in accordance with the directions given in the letter found in the red leather bag.

There were four pockets in the coat, which was very old and very ragged. Three proved to be empty, but from the fourth—it was the breast-pocket—the detective drew forth a pasteboard envelope, sodden with water, the address upon the outside being badly blurred.

The envelope was full of sheets of paper, now pressed into one thick, compact mass.

To attempt to remove them in the condition they were in was to destroy them, and Old King Brady thrust the envelope into his pocket and dropped the coat quietly over the side.

It would have been interesting for "Joe" could he have seen all this.

But Joe and Nick had reached their present point of observation too late to see this.

When first they espied the detective and his companion, Old King Brady had just succeeded in finding the coffin; Tom Carleton leaping overboard without stopping to remove his clothes, had made the rope fast about it and was now in the act of drawing it up.

"Ah, ah! I knew it! I was sure of it!" cried the detective, triumphantly. "I was certain that we should find it. Never have I had a shorter case or one with a more satisfactory ending. Hold hard, young man, I'll lend you a hand. A coffin full of stones is no light weight. You'll hardly be able to draw it into the boat alone."

So short a case.

Never had Old King Brady been more gravely mistaken.

Meanwhile the watchers in the bushes continued to observe their every movement.

They saw them draw the coffin slowly out of the water, and with much difficulty land it in the boat.

"Good enough!" they heard Old King Brady exclaim, his deep voice echoing among the trees. "We've got the proof now, young man. Bear a hand and we'll pull for the shore."

"Joe?"

"Well, what do you want?"

The answer came surlily.

"Aren't you going to fire?"

"Not now. Thanks to your stupid carelessness, our fate hangs upon one shot. I can't hope to wing both of 'em. Suppose I miss?"

He arose as he spoke, and together they crept stealthily through the bushes in the direction of the spot toward which Old King Brady had headed the boat.

"Look here," whispered Nick, "I don't like this murder business for a cent. To plot as we've been plotting is one thing, to take a life is quite another. I'm glad now that the stone I threw didn't kill him, I swear I am!"

"Why, you miserable poltroon! After all I have promised to do for you. After my letting you into the secret——"

"There, there, don't get rusty. I've done my share in the job, I guess. After all, why need there be murder? You seem to forget that Tom Carleton is of your own flesh and blood."

"I forget nothing. I hate him. I would shoot him like a dog."

"You are wrong. Depend upon it, nothing but bad luck can come of it. Now, listen, Joe, and be reasonable. I've got something to propose."

"Well, what is it? Be quick."

"You know Captain Mac is outside with his ship—the Magdalena."

"Of course. Didn't he stop at Saquaket creek on his way to Australia, that we might ship half his double crew secretly. I ought to know it. It has cost me enough."

"Don't snap at a fellow so. Now what I propose is this: Let's lay low till they land with the coffin, and then rush out upon them suddenly. We've got two pistols. They'll never know they ain't loaded, and if worse comes to worse, you've still got your one shot at short range."

"Well, well. What's that to do with Captain Mac?"

"This: We can easily capture them. There's rope enough in the boat to tie 'em. We'll dump that coffin full of stones for the second time, and pull with our prisoners out to the Magdalena. Captain Mac will help us out, I'm certain. With Old King Brady and Tom Carleton on their way to Australia, what have we to fear?"

For some moments Joe remained silent.

"Nick," he said, at last, "you've got a long head, if you are a coward. You are right; murder is a dangerous business. But how about the other fellow?"

"Thunder!" whispered Nick, "I never thought of him. Well, if worse comes to worse we can take him along."

"It's a go!" answered the other. "We've only one shot, and there's no use running risks. If one of them should escape we're dished."

And they crept on.

* * * * *

"Hello! Hello! On board the Magdalena!"

A man in sailor's dress bent over the rail of the ship as the cry broke the silence of the night.

"What's wanted?"

"Is Captain Mac on board?"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said the sailor, hoarsely. "Yes, the cap's aboard. What do you want?"

"We want to speak to him. Throw us a line."

Down rattled the line, which was instantly seized and made fast by the men in the boat.

There were four men in the boat.

One stood upright in the bows, another sat in the stern, while the remaining two, gagged and bound, lay across the seats.

When the boat pulled away from the Magdalena half an hour later, the anchor had already been raised and the ship was moving along the waters of the Sound, her long voyage to the Antipodes already begun.

Now there were but two men in the boat.

As they turned to gaze after the ship they grasped each other's hands.

"Joe, we've done it!"

"Nick, you're a trump! Your plan was simply immense!"

"Do you suppose Old King Brady is dead?"

"I neither know nor care. I don't believe my shot touched a vital spot, it struck too low. If he is dead or dies, may the sharks enjoy him; and I shan't cry if Tom Carleton keeps him company, too!"

"But if not?"

"If not—why, then, let them live. It is fate. One thing is sure—long before they can raise a hand to hinder us we shall have sailed for Corpus Christi. Old King Brady can never trouble us again!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"TO THE BOATS!"

"Come, moosey out of that now. You've played off long enough. You're no more sick than I am. Get the bucket and slush down the deck."

"Here, give me the bucket, I'll do it for you, Mr. Brady," whispered a young, manly voice beside the old man, who, as the brutal mate turned away, tottered off to obey. "We've got to make the best of our situation, seeing that we can't help ourselves. How are you feeling to-day?"

"Better, thank you, Tom. Much better. My wound has about healed now, but I'm an old man, my boy, and at my age one don't soon pick up strength."

"It's a shame to make you work before you are able," was the answer. "But they are nothing but a pack of ruffians on board the Magdalena, from the captain down. God knows I've regretted a thousand times that I didn't strangle Crafton Wise that night when I had my fingers about his throat."

"Hush!" whispered the old man, who had leaned against the mainmast, wearily. "The mate is returning. Meet me to-night under the shadow of the starboard life-boat. Meanwhile, give me the bucket; at least I must pretend to obey."

And while Tom Carleton stole away, Old King Brady picked up the bucket, wearily, and tottered toward the rail.

* * * * *

Night in the Carribean Sea!

Is a single word of explanation needed to account for the presence of Old King Brady and Tom Carleton on board the Magdalena?

We feel certain that there is not.

Lest we should be in error, however, let us simply say that, taken unawares among the bushes which line the banks of Sequaket creek, the youth and the old man had fallen victims to the iniquitous scheme of Nick's.

Not easy victims, though. Far from it.

They had just landed, with the coffin, and Old King Brady had burst the lid, finding it, as he felt certain he would, filled with stones.

Then it was that the two villains sprang upon them and Old King Brady had been shot and Tom overpowered.

When Old King Brady came back to consciousness, he found himself for the second time in his eventful career on board ship, bound for Australia against his will.

They had been at sea a week now, and though Old King Brady's wound had healed most satisfactorily, the prospect was gloomy, indeed.

But to return.

Tom Carleton crept on toward the starboard life-boat.

Placed by the mate in a different watch, this, if he should not be interfered with, would be the first opportunity the young man had found to hold five minutes' conversation with his companion in misery, alone.

"Hist, hist! Mr. Brady, are you there?"

"Here, my boy, and waiting for you. Crawl in behind the boat. I have something to say."

Tom obeyed.

Creeping behind the life-boat, he crouched in the shadows by the side of the old detective, who, leaning against the rail, had been attentively watching the phosphorescence as it gleamed upon the bosom of the heaving sea.

"This is a bad business, Mr. Brady."

"A bad business, as you say, my boy."

"For myself I don't care much. I am young and strong, and have no fears for the future, but for an old man like you——"

"Hush! I can bear it. I have been in many situations more trying. But let us not speak of it now. It is the first chance I have found to have a word with you alone, and I have something to say."

"Something good or something bad?"

"Neither—both. You recollect the strange story you told me in the berry-pickers' hut about the death of your Uncle Matthew Minnett and the secret he bequeathed you in the red leather bag?"

"Yes; oh, yes!"

"You recollect, also, the coat we pulled out of the creek that night, and the brown pasteboard envelope filled with papers which I took from the pocket?"

"Indeed, I do. You don't mean to tell me——"

"That those papers contain your Uncle Matthew's secret? Yes, that is just what I mean to tell you—at least in part."

"Well, I never!" breathed Tom, in amazement. "You have been reading the papers? You have found it out?"

"I have dried the papers and read them. Fortunately, those scoundrels did not search our pockets. However, you must prepare for a disappointment. The packet contains only a portion of the papers. The most important one of all is gone."

"Gone? You don't say so! Well, it is just my luck. Have you the papers with you, Mr. Brady?"

"They are here," replied the detective, producing the packet, "but it is too dark for me to read them. However, it is not necessary. I have read them so many times that I know all they contain very well."

How Tom Carleton's heart fluttered!

Now that the time had at last arrived, and so unexpectedly, when the secret of Matthew Minnett was to be disclosed, he hardly dared to ask what it was.

But it was not necessary.

Old King Brady, disturbed by no such emotions, was already speaking again.

"Listen, Tom Carleton," he said, in his usual quiet tones. "Though I am by no means a sanguine man, I am free to confess that I believe every word your uncle has written, and, believing it, tell you that you have narrowly missed becoming a very rich man. This secret also has opened my eyes in another direction. It fully explains the desperate means taken by your cousin, Crafton Wise, alias Joe Blackwell, to raise money. Unless he has been interfered with he is, no doubt, ere this on his way to secure the dead pirate's gold."

"Pirate!" echoed Tom. "You can't mean Uncle Matt?"

"I mean no one else. In his younger days your uncle was a pirate, and according to his own written account, which covers many pages, must have been a very desperate man."

"It is useless for me to go over it all, for I now give you the papers which were to have been your legacy, and you can peruse them at your leisure. Let me simply give you the outlines of the golden secret which he kept until his dying day."

"Many years ago, when the people of the republic of Venezuela revolted against the crown of Spain, certain loyalists, who were also Jesuit priests, fearing an attack upon the church in the city of Guayaquil, one of the richest in the country, stripped it of all its wealth, which they loaded on a ship and set sail for Spain."

"Besides the rich communion service, the golden vessels, candlesticks, shrines, the host studded with diamonds, and many other articles used in the gorgeous ceremonial of the Catholic religion, there was a sum in gold amounting to a million and over, the contributions of the faithful, which was stowed in a number of wooden chests."

"To have tried to stay the hands of these priestly bandits would have been a sacrilege in the eyes of the simple natives, so they sailed away, taking the wealth of the city with them, only to fall a prey to piratical craft of which your uncle formed one of the crew."

"And did they capture the gold?" questioned Tom, who was listening with breathless interest.

"They captured the ship," continued Old King Brady, "and after transferring the treasure to their own vessel, burned it. Then they did a very foolish and very wicked thing, for which they were punished as they deserved."

"You mean that they murdered the priests?"

"Precisely. Murdered them, one by one, in cold blood. And most righteously were they punished for it as you shall see."

"For a long time these pirates had their rendezvous upon a small island off the coast of Venezuela. Formerly the island had been settled, and there was an old, ruined church upon it, but because it had been repeatedly visited by earthquakes it had been deserted long before."

"Hither the pirates now repaired, and storing the gold in the ruined church, were about to set out on another cruise when an earthquake suddenly came upon them."

"The island sank in a twinkling, and the ship was swallowed up along with it. Every man of its company perished except your uncle, who, fortunately for him, had been sent to a neighboring island to look for fresh water, the spring on the island to which the pirates usually resorted having grown brackish from some unexplained cause."

"And the treasure is there yet?" breathed Tom.

"Every penny of it, but just at this point the narrative ends. The paper containing the name and location of the island is missing. It is not difficult to imagine that it is in the possession of Crafton Wise."

Tom uttered a smothered exclamation of rage.

"It is no use to regret a matter that is past regret," said Old King Brady, calmly. "Could you have obtained the red leather bag that night, the result might have been different. Still, I believe a curse hangs over all ill-gotten gold. For my part, were it in my power to obtain this treasure, I would not touch a penny of it. But, then, I am an old man and very rich. With you the case is different, for at your age—great heavens, what cry was that?"

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Three times repeated, the awful word rang out upon the stillness of the moonlit sea.

Old King Brady leaped to his feet.

"Loose the lines, boy!" he whispered. "Don't you hear? Don't you understand? This ship is packed with oil. That cry can have but one meaning—she is doomed!"

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Up from the cabin dashed the captain, from their beds in the fo'castle swarmed the crew.

"Man the boats!" shrieked the hoarse voice of Mr. Bull. "Man the boats, you lubbers! The oil's ablaze and we are lost!"

Even as he spoke a thick smoke crept up through the hatches, ascending higher and higher, until it had enveloped every sail and shroud.

Man the boats?

Man nothing!

There was not a true man among the crew.

Like madmen they swarmed for the life-boats, pushing, cursing, striking each other down, trampling the weak ones under foot.

And Tom Carleton and Old King Brady?

Well was it for the young man that he had for a companion one so thoroughly versed in the ways of the world, so quick to think and act.

"We owe these people nothing. They will sacrifice our lives to save their own."

Thus whispered Old King Brady as he sprang into the lifeboat after Tom Carleton, and whipping out his knife cut the davit ropes.

Then came the fall and an instant of breathless anxiety. Fortune favored them. The boat rested upright upon the waves.

Crack! crack! crack! crack!

Shots sped after them, falling harmlessly in the water.

"Pull! Pull for your life, boy!" breathed Old King Brady, and they pulled—pulled with all the strength they possessed, never stopping to look behind.

When at last Old King Brady turned he could see only two boats leaving the ship—that the others had been swamped by the efforts of the crew to board them he could not doubt.

Flames were bursting from the ill-fated Magdalena, while high above her masthead rolled a dense cloud of smoke, so black as to well night obscure the light of the moon.

CHAPTER IX.

ADrift IN AN OPEN BOAT.

Adrift in an open boat!

Terrible, indeed, under any circumstances, but doubly so under those in which Old King Brady and Tom Carleton found themselves placed, for they were not only adrift, but were without a morsel of food or even a sup of water to moisten their parched lips.

Almost immediately after leaving the Magdalena a stiff breeze sprang up and the sky became obscured by clouds.

"We're sure to run in with some ship; we are directly on the track of the whole South American trade," said Old King Brady.

"It is hopeless—we are doomed," Tom would reply. "It is a judgment on us for seizing the boat as we did."

But Old King Brady knew better.

Whatever may be true of the "curse of heaven" in some cases, it surely could not apply to this.

Day succeeded day, and still no relief came.

On and on they drifted, beneath a burning sun, untempered by a single cloud.

The tenth day dawned as hot and burning as any which had preceded it, but it was a memorable day in the annals of Old King Brady's life, for as the sun rose above the blue expanse of the Carribean, its first rays rested upon a sail.

"A sail! A sail! Look up, boy! They see us! We may yet be saved!"

But Tom Carleton never raised his head, as he sat leaning back against the bow of the boat, one naked arm thrown carelessly over the gunwale, his old, slouch hat dropped down over his eyes.

"A sail—a sail! Wake up, Tom Carleton. Help is near!"

Waving his hat frantically, Old King Brady strove to rise and touch the youth that he might know if the end had really come.

Was it one step or two?

Old King Brady could never tell.

That he stumbled and fell, he remembered.

After that came unconsciousness, and after the unconsciousness a pleasing sense of rest.

Old King Brady opened his eyes wearily and was feebly amazed to find himself supported by a pair of strong arms, lying upon the firm deck of a ship.

Beside him lay Tom Carleton, supported by a man in sailor's clothes.

Another man, wearing the cap of an officer, bent over the youth, holding in his hand a tumbler which seemed to contain liquor, some of which he was trying to force between Tom's set lips from a spoon.

A man dressed in white stood calmly at the wheel; a lad wearing a straw hat bent forward, curiously watching what was going on, close behind the old detective himself; the sun shone as brightly as ever, the sails flopping idly against the ropes.

It seemed to Old King Brady as though they were sailing into eternity and all was peace.

CHAPTER X.

CONCERNING MR. PHINEAS PHIPPS.

Mr. Phineas Phipps was a coward.

When he made this statement to Old King Brady, the agent for the great Cosmopolitan Life Insurance Company told the simple truth.

Such was the character of Old King Brady's chance companion on the road to Sequaket.

Possibly the reader has been disposed to regard him as the same person as "Nick," the man who attacked Old King Brady on the road, who helped to send Tom Carleton and the detective on a sea voyage against their will.

This is an error.

Let us return to Mr. Phipps, whom we left waiting for Old King Brady at the edge of the clearing in which stood the stone hut, and see how it all came about.

Cowards, by their cowardice, sometimes thrust themselves into dangers that braver men manage to avoid.

Had Mr. Phipps accompanied Old King Brady, he might not have escaped danger—probably would not—but he would not have found himself face to face with Nick, who suddenly rose out of the bushes behind him at the precise moment that Old King Brady crossed the threshold of the hut.

At the sound of the crashing bushes, Mr. Phipps turned abruptly.

His face became deathly pale, his teeth began chattering, and his limbs trembled beneath him, for there stood the man uppermost in his thoughts.

"Nicholas Nodine! Oh, good Lord!"

"Well?"

Nick's countenance looked stern and threatening. He raised a stick, which he carried, in a threatening way.

"I thought you were dead!" gasped the insurance agent, trembling still more violently.

To this Nick answered, promptly.

"Phipps, you lie!"

"N-no. I d-don't!" stammered the other. "I did. 'Pon my word, I did."

"Again I say you lie! If you thought me dead, what brings you prowling about this hut?"

"I b-beg your pardon, Mr. Nodine, I——"

"Shut up! Phipps, you're a fool. I've a great mind to rap you over the head. No, I'm not dead. Look at me. I flatter myself I'm very much alive."

Phipps started back.

He would have turned and fled, but the bushes were thick behind him, and to make his escape either to the right or left it was necessary to come within closer reach of the stick.

"It was an accident. I swear it was an accident," he muttered, hoarsely. "I came out here to hun——"

"Again you lie! Do you hunt without a gun?"

"I—I mean to fish."

"But you have no pole. You are lying again, Phipps. You lied to me when you got me to take out that policy in your company, you are always lying. Quick! Tell me who that man is who has just entered the hut, and see that you don't lie now."

"It—it—is is Old King Brady, the detective," stammered the wretched agent. "S-say, Mr. Nodine, let me go, won't you? I'll go right back to New York—I swear I will. I'll never tell that I saw you alive—I swear I won't, if you'll only let me go."

"Go to thunder!" hissed the other, fiercely, swinging his stick about his head and bringing it down upon the occiput of the wretched agent, with a resounding whack.

With a deep groan Mr. Phipps tottered backward and fell senseless to the ground.

"That settles you, you blamed spy!" muttered Nick, fiercely.

Throwing aside his stick, he bent over Mr. Phipps.

To all appearance the man had ceased to breathe.

"He's fixed," came the whispered exclamation. "Now for the other."

Quickly he threw off his coat and hat, and, tossing them in the thicket, donned those of Mr. Phipps.

Then dragging the body back among the bushes he crept stealthily toward the hut.

Having thus disposed of Mr. Phipps, it was quite natural that Nick should expect to find his body where he left it upon his return in company with Crafton Wise, alias Joe Blackwell, from their little expedition to the good ship Magdalena, the details of which have already been told.

In this he was disappointed.

Not only disappointed, but puzzled and perplexed.

He was sure that he had effectually disposed of Phipps, yet when he and Wise, after leaving their boat at a convenient spot on the banks of the creek, returned to the clump of bushes, not only had the body of the agent disappeared, but his own hat and coat as well.

"Confound it! Here is more of your half-finished work!" exclaimed Wise, angrily. "I'll bet you what you like, Nick, that the fellow has made his escape to Sequaket. Next thing we know there'll be a crowd down upon us. After all, you're but a sorry fool!"

"Well, it can't be helped. Confound the meddling fool, how do you suppose he ever got on to us?"

"Old King Brady?" said Nick, questioningly.

"Perhaps you are right, but we have nothing further to fear from Old King Brady, at all events. Come, let us return to the hut."

It was very late now—after midnight, and not a sound broke the stillness of the swamp.

Hurrying to the clearing, the two men strode over the dew-laden grass. Wise striking off the heads of the weeds fiercely with the stick he carried, as though angry even with his thoughts.

"By the way," said Nick, "what did you do with the red leather bag?"

"Left it in the boat. Of what use is it now that it's empty?"

"Pshaw! What matters those rubbishing papers? You have still got the paper describing the location of the treasure. What more do you want? But before we start I shall get the bag. As long as it was in my possession, luck hung by us; once we lost it—good Lord! What's that?"

It was some one singing a rollicking sea song.

"What can it mean?" whispered Nick. "It sounds for all the world as though some one were singing in the hut."

They crept stealthily forward, and while the singing continued, both peered curiously through the diamond-shaped opening cut in the weather-beaten shutters which concealed the window of the hut.

CHAPTER XI.

"IS HE ALIVE OR DEAD?"

"Pshaw! It's only the boys, after all!" exclaimed Crafton Wise, in tones of disgust, as he drew back from the window of the hut.

They drew away from the window and together moved toward the door.

Without ceremony Crafton Wise raised the latch and flung it open, revealing a scene which made his brow grow dark.

"Boggs, you idiot! What in thunder do you mean by bellowing like the bull of Bashan!" he demanded, fiercely. "Guzzling, too, and against my express orders! Back to the schooner, every mother's son of you! The whole countryside will be down on us next thing you know."

There were at least a dozen men in the hut, rough, brawny fellows—sailors, and of the lowest type.

At the entrance of Crafton Wise and his companion all leaped to their feet.

"Beg pardon, captain," stammered Mr. Boggs, the mate, "but it was so blame dull on board that we thought——"

"You thought we had gone for the night, you scoundrels! And you remembered the whisky. Luckily I came in time to prevent you all from getting maudlin. Come, stir yourselves. The time has come. The Raven must sail as soon as we can rattle these things aboard."

For once—for such was not his custom unless it particularly served his purpose—Crafton Wise spoke the truth.

Long before the first rays of the rising sun had gilded the tree-tops of Darling's swamp, the Raven, a three-masted schooner, which for weeks had lain concealed beneath the high bluff at the mouth of Sequaket creek, had put to sea.

Every box, every bale in the hut had been carried aboard; the boat had been brought up to the schooner from the landing place, Crafton Wise taking possession of the red leather bag.

Meanwhile, not a trace had been discovered of Mr. Phineas Phipps.

Boggs, the mate, had seen nothing, heard nothing, and the same was true of the man left to guard the Raven at the foot of the little eminence upon which stood the hut.

Thus up to the moment of sailing, the fate of Mr. Phipps remained a mystery.

"He made tracks for Sequaket, I suppose," said Wise to Nick, as together they paced the deck of the Raven, just before the rising of the sun.

"Well, he can't harm us now, at all events."

"Not much. Now no one can stop us. We are off—off for Corpus Christi—off for riches, and—and—well, all the rest."

"Pooh! You're a poor hand to talk high-flown nonsense!" retorted Nick, throwing himself down upon a coil of rope which lay upon the deck well forward. "Sit down here, Craft, will you? I'm dead tired, and move we have a good smoke and then turn in."

"I'm with you," replied Wise, dropping beside him. "What's this under me? Oh, that confounded bag I slung round my shoulder. To humor your notion of its bringing us luck, Nick, I have put the paper inside of it. See, here it is!"

As he spoke, Crafton Wise half rose and drew from beneath him the red leather bag—Tom Carleton's legacy from old Matthew Minnett.

Loosening the buckle of the strap which secured it about his body, he now threw it carelessly upon the deck beside him, having first opened it slightly, revealing to his companion one end of a folded paper, yellow with age, which was concealed within.

"Better take care you don't lose it," growled Nick. "We'd be in a sweet pickle if you did."

He drew out a pipe, filled and lighted it, and settled himself back for a smoke.

Crafton Wise followed his example. For some time neither spoke.

Meanwhile, the Raven was moving steadily forward along the Sound, Mr. Boggs having bent all sail to make the most of a favorable breeze.

The deck was littered with the "plunder" brought hastily down from the hut. Directly in front of the two men were a number of barrels, over which a heavy tarpaulin had been carelessly thrown.

Who mentioned Phipps?

Positively we cannot tell whether it was Crafton Wise or Nick Nodine.

All we know is that when one of the pair made some allusion to the unfortunate insurance agent some moments later, Nick, chancing to turn his gaze in the direction of the tarpaulin, saw or thought he saw two eager eyes peer at him around the corner of the barrels for a single instant, and then disappear.

"Craf! Craf! Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"That face behind the barrels. I'll swear it was the face of Phipps!"

"Phipps? Nonsense!"

"But it was. Did you not see it?"

"I saw nothing. You must have indulged in an extra swig while you were bringing that demijohn of whisky down from the hut. See, there is no one here. Nick, I begin to think you are a fool."

"You are altogether too fond of that word," retorted the other, angrily—they had both arisen and passed behind the barrels now. "I tell you I saw the face of Phipps as plainly as I now see yours. He's on board here, as sure as fate, and I propose to have him out."

He began moving angrily about among the goods strewn about the deck. Crafton Wise, sitting down upon the tarpaulin, smiled sarcastically and resumed his smoke.

Presently Nick's voice was heard, exclaiming:

"By thunder!"

"What now?" asked Wise, moving toward their former position by the coil of rope where Nodine now stood.

"The bag—the red leather bag!"

"What of the bag?"

"What of it? Perhaps you'll believe me now. The red leather bag is gone!"

"Gone!"

"Look for yourself. You threw it there."

"Nick, we are ruined without that bag! The paper!"

"Gone with it, my friend. You wouldn't listen to me. Who says I didn't see the face of Phineas Phipps now?"

"But it is impossible. If you saw Phipps, where is he? Answer me that."

"Can't do it," retorted Nick, stolidly, "but, all the same, I know I saw him. It was Phipps or his ghost. The question is which: Is he alive or dead?"

CHAPTER XII.

SEEN BY THE LIGHTNING'S FLASH.

"It would not surprise me," remarked Captain Holly, of the good ship Seraphina and Susan, "it would not surprise me, gentlemen, if we made Aspinwall by dawn to-morrow morning, or at the latest by nine o'clock."

"That's good news, certainly," replied the elderly gentleman, who leaned against the rail, dressed in a suit of Captain Holly's clothes. "Tom, my boy, I suppose you will not be sorry to set your foot on shore again."

"No, indeed," replied Tom Carleton, who stood beside the speaker—who, of course, is understood to be Old King Brady. "Land us anywhere, captain, so that you land us. If I could avoid it, my foot should never tread a ship's deck again."

"I'll land you to-morrow, or I'm a ghost," replied the captain, smiling. "Don't wonder you're sick of the sea, my boy, after such an experience as yours."

Yes, it was Tom Carleton and Old King Brady.

A week on board the Seraphina and Susan, rated A1 English Lloyds, bound for the Isthmus from Liverpool, had wrought a wonderful change.

Care and good nursing did it.

Certainly if Old King Brady had been his brother, and Tom Carleton his son, Captain Holly could not have shown them more attention than he did.

Inded, we would like to dwell longer upon this theme, for it is a pleasant one, did space permit us.

Such, however, is not the case, for the progress of our story demands that we hurry on to other and more startling events.

The next few hours experienced a remarkable change in their journey.

From a calm and peaceful scene the blue waters of the Carribean were lashed into fury.

The good ship Seraphina and Susan, water-logged and deserted, now scudded, dismasted, through the howling storm.

A cyclone in the tropics!

It was this which had happened.

Suddenly it came upon them in the darkness and again

there rose the awful cry: "The ship is sinking! Man the boats!"

Good Captain Holly—the crew—where were they?

It would be useless to ask Tom Carleton or Old King Brady, for they could not have told.

Both had left the doomed ship in the second boat which, in launching, had been overturned the instant it struck the heaving waves.

It was Tom who did it.

How he managed to right the boat, how, when he saw by the lightning flash, Old King Brady struggling bravely, he contrived to draw him in, were matters which rested but dimly in his mind.

But he did it.

Oh, yes, he did it.

Again the old detective, with Tom Carleton for his companion, were alone in an open boat and at the mercy of the storm.

Silent and motionless, the old man lay stretched in the bottom of the boat.

Was he dead or dying?

Just then Tom thought so, but he was powerless to help him.

Then something happened which served to shake the disbelief Tom had always had in the supernatural.

A flash of lightning more vivid than all which had preceded it, suddenly broke up them, lighting up the waste of waters for yards around.

It came and went, but during the brief moment of its existence it revealed to Tom Carleton a sight which to the last moment of his existence he never forgot.

What was it?

What, indeed?

It seemed incredible, yet he saw it most distinctly.

Saw, not twenty yards away from him, another boat in a situation as desperate as his own.

In that boat, with staring eyes and face as white as the face of a corpse, sat his cousin, Crafton Wise!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SPECTRE OF THE STORM.

For the space of several moments Crafton Wise stood staring at his companion, dumbly.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he breathed, after a little. "Do you understand the full import to us in the loss of the red leather bag?"

"Do I? Don't I! I know that in the bag is the paper which describes the exact location of the sunken island of Corpus Christi, and the means of laying hold of the treasure your piratical old uncle helped to steal from the Spanish priests. Of course, though, you have made a copy of that paper, Craf?"

"Of course, I haven't. No jibing, Nick; the matter is altogether too serious. Fool that I was to listen to your whinings about luck being in the red leather bag. If I had put my money in my pocket as I had ought to have done, I——"

"Your money! You mean the paper!"

"I mean what I say; or, rather, I mean both. Like an ass I put what ready money I had in the bag along with the paper—some two thousand, to say nothing of that letter of credit on Guttierrez & Prado, the Panama bankers, for ten thousand more. Now do you begin to understand?"

"Craf! Can this be possible? Then you haven't got a blessed cent unless the bag is found?"

"Precisely. Now you comprehend our situation, Nick. If you actually saw the insurance agent—and I begin to believe it—I'll have him out if I have to measure off the Raven in square inches and search it, inch by inch.

"Boggs! Oh, Boggs!" he roared, dashing to the stern, where the mate could be seen standing. "Call all hands on deck! I've been robbed! I've been robbed!"

It was his theory then that Phineas Phipps, if actually on board the schooner, must be there in disguise of one of the crew; but in this he was mistaken.

Every man was summoned, and by Boggs ranged in line before Crafton Wise and Nick.

Phineas Phipps was not among the crew.

"You won't find him this way," said Nick. "He is hiding somewhere among the plunder on the deck or in the hold."

Then they searched the deck.

Each box, each bale, each barrel was moved from its place and carefully examined.

The result was the same.

Phineas Phipps was not in hiding on deck.

By this time the sun had risen, and the order came to explore the hold.

Thoroughly fatigued now, both Wise and his companion turned in to rest, leaving the matter in the charge of Mr. Boggs.

Did the mate explore the hold?

He said he did, and an hour later, when Crafton Wise, rousing himself, summoned him, he reported that the examination had been made in the most thorough manner.

According to Mr. Boggs, Phineas Phipps was not concealed in the hold.

Such was the mystery of the Raven.

Day succeeded day and the schooner had dropped well down into the tropics.

Still the red leather bag, with its precious contents, was missing; the mystery remained unexplained.

Long before this Crafton Wise had dismissed the Phipps theory as a vagary of Nick's over-excitability brain.

"It's all rubbish," he said one evening as they were pacing the deck together, some two weeks later. "It's all rubbish, I tell you. You think you saw Phipps, but you never did. One of the crew, tempted by the money which I must have carelessly displayed, stole the bag. When we get to Aspinwall I shall find out, depend upon it. Then let him beware!"

"Keep on thinking so," snorted Nick, for an answer. "I tell you I did see him, you may say what you like to the contrary. I saw Phineas Phipps looking at me that night, or I saw his ghost."

Here the conversation was suddenly interrupted by Boggs, who came rushing up from the cabin.

"Reef all sail! Quick, quick!" he shouted. "Haul in, you lubbers! Haul in! It's going to blow like time!"

"What's the matter?" questioned Wise, with a quick glance at the heavens, which had grown dark and lowering.

"Matter enough!" roared the mate. "The barometer has dropped clean down out of sight. I've sailed these seas often enough to know what that means, if you don't. There's a cyclone after us. That's what's the matter, as you'll soon find out."

Soon a light breeze swept the deck, and the sails, which for hours had been flapping idly, began to fill.

"Well, let her come," said Wise, carelessly. "I guess the Raven is good for it. A stancher craft was never built."

The words had scarcely left his lips when a loud, roaring sound was heard behind them, which was immediately followed by a blast which seemed to fairly raise the schooner from the surface of the sea.

The cyclone had struck them suddenly, so suddenly that, but for the fact that the sails were old and the lines rotten, the moment of contact with the terror of the tropics would, to a certainty, have been the last of all on board.

The sails were ripped to ribbons in an instant; the ropes snapped like grocer's twine.

The wind was directly against them and every moment increasing its fearful power.

The Raven was but a feather on the waves.

"Crack!"

A mast had gone by the board.

"Crack!"

Another had followed it.

Now all was confusion. And amid the crashing thunder and incessant flashes of lightning, the crew, throwing aside all thought of discipline, rushed as one man for the boats.

Long before the culmination of this series of disasters, Crafton Wise and Nick had grasped the situation.

It was plainly evident that the Raven had been caught in the centre of the cyclone, and equally so that her fate was sealed.

"We must save ourselves," Wise had whispered. "The stern boat is our game, Nick. Quick, old man, we have not a moment to lose!"

They were hurrying aft, when all at once a flash of lightning of the most fearful intensity illuminated the darkened heavens.

"Look! Look! There it is again!" screamed Nick, grasping his companion by the arm.

What was it?

Well, under ordinary circumstances it would have been nothing so very fearful.

It was nothing but the form of the little insurance agent standing directly in their path.

His face was pale and haggard, his garments drenched with water and covered with slime, while hanging by his side, attached to its strap, was the missing red leather bag!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE UBIQUITOUS MR. PHIPPS IS SEEN AGAIN.

"Yes, sir. It has been presented. It was cashed at half-past five o'clock yesterday afternoon."

"Thunder, no!"

"Excuse me, sir, but I say yes," replied the English-speaking clerk of Guttierrez & Prado, the Spanish bankers at Panama, speaking emphatically. "The draft was duly presented, and as it was drawn in favor of bearer, we could not do otherwise than pay."

Crafton Wise leaned against the counter, heavily.

"But the draft was stolen from me," he stammered. "I shall hold you responsible. I——"

He said no more, for he knew that it was useless.

Sinking into a chair he remained for some seconds motionless, his face buried in his hands.

"Look here, friend, what sort of a person was it that presented the draft?" inquired Nick, stepping forward. He had not spoken until now.

"Little man, with a loud voice," replied the clerk. "Brown hair, rather curly, smooth face, shabby clothes, and——"

"It is enough," said Nick, hollowly. "Come on, Craft. There is no use in staying here. Explain it as you will, Phipps is the man."

Linking his arm within that of his friend they left the bank together, and for some hours slowly paced the streets of the ancient city of Panama.

They were alive; they had reached the end of the first stage of their journey, but they were penniless, strangers in a strange land.

Despite the skill with which his plans had been laid, Crafton Wise now found his affairs in very bad shape, and many times felt himself wondering whether in dealing treacherously with his cousin he had not played the fool, after all.

Yes, they were alive, though when they came to look back upon the events of that fearful night, their survival seemed most miraculous.

Until now it had been their firm belief that out of all who had left Sequaket on board the Raven, they alone remained on earth.

Yet why they had survived where others perished, they hardly knew.

With the vanishing of the lightning's flash the spectre of Phineas Phipps had vanished also.

In an instant Wise was upon the spot where it stood, finding only vacancy, hearing naught save the cries of the sailors and the howl of the storm.

To dwell upon the events which followed is needless.

Suffice to say that Wise and Nick secured the stern boat, and where each of the remaining four, which the Raven carried, capsized instantly, that alone remained upright on the surface of the waves.

Then as they were helplessly buffeted about in the darkness, there came to Crafton Wise another vision.

He had no belief in its reality, but regarded it simply as the outcome of an overwrought brain.

He thought he saw in the brief moment of another flash of lightning, while Nick lay half unconscious at his feet, a boat close beside him, in which poor Tom Carleton sat alone.

He saw it but for an instant, for the next and it was not. He called the name of his cousin again and again, but heard no voice in reply.

Now the reader knows a thing or two concerning this seemingly strange occurrence, but Nick only laughed at Wise when he told what he had seen.

"We are both going mad, I think," was what he said, and by and by the storm swept past them, and their frail boat floated quietly upon the waves.

At last came the morning, and with it rescue in the shape of a ship's long boat carrying a very respectable crew.

"Well, mates, and who may you be?" questioned the bluff, red-faced captain, as Wise and Nick took their places in the long boat, "though whoever you are, heaven knows you are welcome to any help that I can give you. It should make men as brothers to have survived a gale like that."

The answer was a lie, of course.

Wise, acting as spokesman, gave fictitious names not only to himself and his companion, but likewise to their ill-fated craft.

Then he learned that his rescuer was one Captain Holly, of the English ship *Seraphina* and Susan, which had shared the fate of the *Raven* in the cyclone the night before.

It was a fortunate thing for the castaways that Captain Holly was a man thoroughly up in his business.

He understood his position perfectly, and though much suffering was in store for them, the long boat headed for Aspinwall, reaching that port safely on the evening of the third day.

Not once during those tedious days were the names of Old King Brady or Tom Carleton mentioned.

The sailors had enough to think about in themselves and their drowned companions, and no time to bemoan the fate of comparative strangers.

Thus when Wise and Nick finally said good-by to Captain Holly and took the train across the Isthmus of Panama, they little dreamed that Old King Brady and Tom Carleton had for days been the companions of the very men to whom they owed their lives.

Shipwreck upon shipwreck, misadventure upon misadventure.

Really, when we come to glance back upon the pages already written, our narrative smacks strongly of the marvelous.

Yet we cannot state matters other than they actually occurred, if we are to adhere to the truth.

Crafton Wise was in a desperate fix, and he knew it.

His schooner was gone, his crew were dead, and worse than all they were barely possessed of sufficient money between them to pay their fares across to Panama.

The object in crossing to the Pacific side of the Isthmus is apparent enough.

If Phipps had actually been alive and on board the *Raven*, he was certainly dead now, and at the bottom of the sea, the red leather bag and its valuable contents with him.

Since no copy existed of the paper which described the exact location of the sunken island of Corpus Christi, further thought of the treasure was, of course, futile.

Moreover, if such a copy had been taken, what would it have availed them?

The *Raven*, with all the expensive diving apparatus which she carried, had passed from existence.

To have attempted to recover the treasure without returning to New York and purchasing a new outfit, would have been folly indeed.

No, Crafton Wise entertained no such thought.

What he hoped for was to be able to recover the \$10,000 for which the letter of credit upon Guttierrez & Prado was drawn.

If the letter was at the bottom of the sea, a presentation of his claim and a cablegram to the drawers would be sufficient to secure him the cash.

Indeed, he had never doubted his ability to so secure it until he came to be confronted with the emphatic statement of the clerk that the original draft had been presented and cashed by a person in every particular resembling Mr. Phipps.

"Nick, what does it all mean? What does it all mean?" he demanded, fiercely, as he found himself still walking with his companion along the track of the Panama railroad, a mile or so beyond the city limits, when the tropical night settled suddenly down upon them at last.

"It means that the Old Boy is working against us, I guess," replied Nick, removing his hat and mopping his head, for the heat was something fearful. "How is it possible that Phipps could have escaped, even providing—hello! we must get off the track. Here comes a train!"

It was the evening train for Aspinwall, and had come upon them suddenly, sweeping around a curve formed by a hill, covered with a heavy growth of palms.

Now it was not twenty feet away from them, and as Nick leaped to one side, expecting Wise to follow him, he heard his companion give utterance to a sudden cry of rage.

What did it mean?

Had the man risen up out of the earth, or was it but a spectre come again to mock them?

There was no time for speculation.

What Nick saw he saw, be the explanation what it might.

He saw Crafton Wise, instead of leaping to one side, dash along the track toward a man who stood motionless between the rails facing the approaching train.

It was Phineas Phipps!

In the light of the locomotive Nick recognized him instantly.

Then he saw Wise grapple with him and press him backward upon the track.

A blur came before Nick's eyes, a cry of horror escaped him.

And the train, with its rattle and roar, swept on.

CHAPTER XV.

UP FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA.

Adrift again!

Yes, adrift again.

Such was the fate of Old King Brady and Tom Carleton when morning dawned, and the sun rising above the blue waters of the Caribbean Sea banished the last trace of the storm.

For what purpose had they been temporarily plucked from a similar fate if, after all, it was written that they should perish in an open boat?

We shall not mention the horrors of the first few hours, save to say that Old King Brady speedily revived, and by his quiet, self-assured manner, served in some measure to still Tom Carleton's fears.

"Hope for the best, my boy," he said. "We escaped before, we may again. It is hard to believe that Heaven, who sent us help in that hour of trial, will desert us now."

Then the old detective, who, in common with most of his nation, was a devout Catholic, drew from some concealment a string of beads, and for a considerable time remained deep in prayer.

Tom regarded him half pityingly.

Still, Old King Brady had told his beads daily, upon that other occasion, and help had come at last.

"If there is any virtue in it," thought Tom, "I hope to goodness he'll never stop until help comes—I shan't interfere."

Neither did he tell of the vision of his cousin, for, like Crafton Wise, he believed it to be but a hallucination, and for even having seen it was inclined to regard himself as something of a fool.

The wind had swept the shouts of Wise away from him, the darkness had shut out the boat from his sight, and thus the cousins, who, under the most remarkable circumstances, had actually seen each other, each refused to credit the plain evidence of their eyes.

Day after day, day after day.

It was horrible—simply horrible!

No food, no water, and with water all around them, too.

As the evening of the third day closed down upon them and the burning sun sank beneath the waves, Tom felt that another twenty-four hours of existence must certainly end it all.

Again they were wasting to shadows, again the demon thirst had them in his fatal clutch.

And yet they were being carried by a strong current in a southeasterly direction, which, as Old King Brady had said, again and again, was sweeping them directly in the track of the traders on the South American coast.

Still they saw no sail, and now that night had come for hours there was to be no hope.

It was fearfully hot; so hot that even the disappearance of the sun seemed to bring but slight relief.

Stripped almost to nakedness, the wretched pair lay stretched in opposite ends of the boat, but little disposed to talk.

It was Tom who at last broke the silence.

"Mr. Brady, we are not going to get out of this."

"Don't be too sure, lad; don't be too sure."

"But I can endure this thirst no longer. The hunger I do not mind so much; it is this horrible burning in the throat which drives me mad."

"Still I hope for the best."

"It is well you can hope. But for your encouraging words I should have flung myself overboard long ago and ended all."

"Tush! tush! don't talk so. Remember, we are old hands at this business. If I could detail to you all the marvelous escapes of my life, you would not wonder that I can hope till the last. Why, do you know what the crooks of New York believe about me?"

"No; what?"

"That I bear a charmed life, and upon my word I half be-

lieve they are right. I have been shot, I have been stabbed, I have been imprisoned in burning buildings, wrecked at sea and buried underground."

"And yet you live!"

"Live? Bless you, yes! I have escaped in every instance. Why, boy, there ain't a professional criminal in America who would think of raising his hand against me. It is a common saying among them that 'Old King Brady will never die.'"

"I only hope your luck won't desert you now," replied Tom, wearily. "Do you know I think it is hotter than ever since the sun went down."

"Really, it seems so; and do you remark how perfectly still it is? Not a breath of air seems to stir."

"Have you the least idea of our position?" asked Tom, after a little.

"Well, no, I can't say that I have. As I remember the map of the Spanish main we ought to be somewhere off the coast of New Grenada, or possibly Venezuela."

"Near the island Corpus Christi, perhaps?"

"Possibly so, but what a mockery it seems to even think of the pirates' treasure in our present situation, for—Tom! Tom! Look! Look! Now may the Blessed Virgin and all the saints be with us. Here comes the end at last!"

No need to call to Tom to look, for it was all about them.

Even as Old King Brady's shout was heard, the whole surface of the sea seemed to suddenly rise beneath them, while from somewhere in the depth below there burst upon their ears a strange, rumbling sound.

"A tidal wave! An earthquake!" shouted Tom, clinging to the sides of the boat, desperately. "Oh, Mr. Brady! What is to be the end of this?"

Now their frail craft was floating upon the very crest of the upheaval.

In a moment more would come the recoil, and then——"

A moment more!

It was coming now!

They were falling—falling—they fell!

To Tom's utter amazement, instead of being overwhelmed in the water, which was now foaming fiercely all about them, the boat suddenly struck something hard and solid, with a grinding sound.

Miracle of miracles!

They had gone aground!

CHAPTER XVI.

MIRACULOUS ESCAPE OF MR. PHIPPS.

Strange as it may seem in a man of his lawless and desperate disposition, Nicholas Nodine was decidedly chicken-hearted.

While he could rap Mr. Phineas Phipps, the omnipresent agent of the Great Universal Cosmopolitan Life Insurance Company, over the head without the slightest compunction, could fling a stone or send a shot at Old King Brady's back, he could not witness such a sight as he now beheld, unmoved.

Nor, perhaps, could any one.

To be crushed into a shapeless mass beneath the wheels of a railroad train is certainly a horrible death to die, and particularly horrible must it be to stand by, knowing that one is helpless, and see death thus come to one's friend.

But was Crafton Wise actually the friend of Nicholas Nodine?

To speak truly he was not; he was actually a friend to no one but himself.

Yet Nick considered him his friend—believed him to be such—and overcome with horror he clutched at one of those curious stone telegraph poles which skirt the Panama Railroad from one end of the Isthmus to the other, and leaned heavily against it for support as the train swept past.

If Wise was dead, what was to become of him?

Such was Nick's next thought.

Then came—there was still balm in Gilead—the recollection that if Wise was killed, Phipps would probably be killed also; that Phipps had the \$10,000 about him—a very snug little sum in itself.

"Toot! Toot! Toot!"

Wildly sounded the whistle of the fateful train.

Nick peered forward into the darkness which had now become that of night, expecting to see the train slow down, but it did not; instead the engineer gave a series of frantic "toots" and the train swept on toward Summit, the first station outside of Panama.

What could it mean?

Could the combatants then have escaped, after all?

Certainly it had that appearance, for were it otherwise the train would have stopped.

Nick hurried forward through the gloom.

"Craf! Oh, Craf!" he called, as he ran.

There was no answer.

"Craf! Oh, Craf!" he shouted again, after the distance of several yards had been passed.

"Well, what in thunder ails you?" spoke the voice of his friend, close beside him, coming so unexpectedly that Nick almost fell off the embankment down into the ditch in his surprise.

There stood Crafton Wise right in front of him, hatless, and with his coat torn half off his back.

He was alone. Nothing whatever of Mr. Phipps could be seen.

"Thank heavens that you have escaped, old fellow!" cried Dick, running toward him.

"Thank the—hush! Do you see anything of him down there in the ditch?"

"Anything of who?" For the instant Nick had forgotten everything save the fact that his friend still lived.

"Stupid! Anything of that thief of an agent, of course. He tumbled down there somewhere when I dragged him off the track."

"Oh, you dragged him off, did you?"

"You bet I did! How else could I be here? See, he has torn the coat off my back, and the dear knows what has become of my hat. My stars! but it was a narrow squeak."

"What in time made you go for him as you did?" whispered Nick. "I should have thought you might have seen the train coming, and——"

"I did see it coming, but I did not realize it was so close to us. What made me go for him? What do you suppose? I wanted my money, and, above all, I wanted the red leather bag."

"You mean the paper in the bag?"

"It is all the same. I—hark! Did I not hear some one calling down there in the ditch?"

"Help! Help! Help!"

He was right. There was some one calling.

From the slimy ooze, all overgrown with reeds and tropical grasses which lay below the embankment, the cry now rose.

Nick, as he leaned over the edge of the embankment peering downward, could distinguish nothing.

Evidently the eyes of Crafton Wise were the better, for he suddenly darted down the slope and presently returned, dragging after him a dripping figure all plastered from head to foot with mud.

It was the little insurance agent, sure enough.

"Gentlemen, for the love of heaven!" he spluttered. "Gentlemen, for the love of heaven!"

"Stand there!" hissed Wise, crowding him back against a telegraph pole and clutching his throat desperately. "Dare to move and I'll strangle you. Speak! You are Phineas Phipps!"

"Gentlemen, for heaven's sake!" whined the agent, piteously. "I swear I did not mean to wrong you. I thought you were both dead."

"Dead! Dead!" cried Wise, in a fierce whisper. "Who's dead? We ain't, but you ought to be! Speak! Where is the red leather bag?"

"L-l-let go of my throat, and I—I—I'll give it up!" stammered the man. "I'll give it up. Gentlemen, for the love of heaven!"

"You'd better. Speak up now, and tell us how you came on board the Raven."

"I—it was an accident," was the answer. "I lost my way in the swamp, and, finally coming to the schooner, climbed on board in a half-dazed condition, and fell down on deck in a swoon."

"I believe you lie; but no matter. You were there—we know that. How did you manage to hide?"

"I—I was under one of the barrels when you were looking for me. Afterward I hid in the hold."

"In the hold! Then Boggs never searched it!"

"Y-yes, he did. I d-dodged him."

"And the night of the storm?"

"I remained on board of the schooner. Next morning the Pacific mail steamer sighted the wreck and took me off."

"The devil must have helped you, then!" cried Nick, in amazement. "Hold him, Craf. I can see the bag sticking out

from under his coat. Hold him, and I'll have it in two shakes."

Springing toward the trembling Phipps, Nick, in an instant, had possessed himself of the red leather bag.

"Is the money in here?" questioned Wise, fiercely.

"Yes; oh, yes!"

"And the paper?"

"The paper is there, too."

"Then go to purgatory, where you belong!" hissed Wise, and with a violent push he sent the poor wretch toppling over the embankment into the ditch.

There was a cry, a loud splash in the darkness, and then all was still.

"There! That disposes of him," said Wise, coolly. "Give me the bag, Nick. By George! it was a lucky thing for us when we walked this way. With that money in our possession we may be able to accomplish something, after all. But I say, what's that light over there?"

"It's the moon just rising, of course," replied Nick, glancing toward one of the palm-covered hills which rose on their left. "Come on, Traf. There's no use in hanging around here. First thing we know some inquisitive person will be down upon us. Let's hurry back to Panama."

"I propose to look into the bag first," answered Wise, coolly, seating himself upon a block of stone.

He opened the red leather bag.

Inside there were three smaller bags filled with golden coins.

"That's all right. It's all here," he said, in tones of satisfaction.

"Don't be too sure till you have counted it."

"I can't see to count it now, but I haven't the least doubt the money is all here. What in the world do you suppose brought the fellow this way?"

"Give it up. Have you found the paper?"

"Not yet. I am going to look for it now. Here, take charge of the coin for a moment, will you?"

Nick obeyed, and again Wise thrust his hand into the red leather bag.

"Confound it all, the paper's not here!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"Thought as much," said Nick, sententiously. "You were in such a thundering hurry to kill him that you have overreached yourself."

"Stay, I have it," said Wise, as he drew forth a sheet of paper. "I know what I'm about, I guess, and——"

"Good Lord!" cried Nick, suddenly, at the same time pointing toward the edge of the bank. "That man has as many lives as a cat. I'll be goshblamed if there he ain't again!"

He was right.

Creeping slowly and painfully up the bank, wet and dripping, and covered with slime and ooze, was the wretched figure of Phineas Phipps.

"Hush!" whispered Wise, grasping a stone. "Hush! he shan't escape me this time."

Crouching down he ran noiselessly forward along the bank.

"Help! Mercy! Help!"

Nick heard the cry, but he never moved.

Then came a groan and the sound of a heavy body rolling down the embankment, followed by a loud splash.

"I'll bet he'll not come to life again this time," growled Wise, returning. "I caught him just as his head came up to the level of the bank and knocked the life out of him with the stone."

Nick shuddered.

"Seems to me I'd have let up on him," he said.

"Let up on him! What for? Didn't he rob us?"

"Yes, but——"

"Pshaw! You are an idiot. Here, let us have a look at the paper now, and—great Caesar's ghost!"

"What now?" demanded Nick.

In answer Crafton Wise simply handed him the paper.

Even in death it seemed written that Phipps was to have the best of them.

The paper was blank!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MAN ON THE BEACH.

What had happened?

For many minutes this was more than Tom Carlton and Old King Brady could comprehend.

There was the boat high and dry upon a muddy stretch of

land, which could now be seen extending to a considerable distance to the right and left.

It was more than marvelous.

But a moment before all about them had been but a waste of waters, and now——

Well, now they were grounded upon an island, and no very considerable island at that.

The tidal wave had retreated.

At the same instant the sun broke from behind the clouds.

It shone upon a scene of desolation, of ruin and of wreck.

The surface of the land upon which the boat had grounded seemed tolerably level, and was thickly covered with mud, slime, shells, seaweed and the like, while here and there were bits of iron protruding from the mud, and in one place that which appeared to be the spar of a ship.

To their right a clump of leafless tree trunks rose, the branches above for the most part having disappeared; beyond these was a black-locking mass which had the appearance of a rocky ledge, and in the distance, to all appearance a good half mile away, appeared a stately edifice, with two towers, looking remarkably like a church.

Lost in speechless amazement, Tom gave one leap out of the boat.

He jumped back as quickly, and was glad to get there, for he had sunk up to his knees in the mud.

Mr. Brady, what does this mean?"

"It is very plain, my boy," replied the old detective, quietly. "There has been an earthquake—that tidal wave was but a part of it—this island has been thrown up from the bottom of the sea."

"I can scarce believe it!"

"Seeing is believing, Tom. Five minutes ago there was no island here, but now—well, well, is it not wonderful? But after all it is only Old King Brady's luck again."

Old King Brady's luck! Well, and so it was.

Marvelous as it seemed, a most unexpected happening had come to pass.

Not that there was anything so very unusual in the sudden casting up of this wave-washed island from the depths of the ocean.

Through a singular and unexplained phenomena, such upheavals have frequently occurred even in recent times; the remarkable part of it was that it should have happened to Old King Brady and Tom Carleton, just in the nick of time.

But other surprises were in store for our castaways.

Leaving the boat at last, first having taken the precaution to remove their clothes, Tom and the detective set out to explore their new domain.

At the outset walking proved to be a difficult and dangerous matter, for they had not gone a dozen yards from the boat before the mud had risen to Old King Brady's waist.

Fortunately it grew no worse, however, and when they had gained the grove, footing was found to be firmer, and the mud no higher than Tom's knees.

"See!" exclaimed the detective, pointing ahead of them.

"See, Tom, that black mass down on the shore there is no ledge. It is the hull of a ship."

"Positively you are right," answered Tom, "but do you know I think we are running an awful risk."

"Why so?"

"Suppose the island were to sink down again?"

"It is not likely."

"I think we should have remained in the boat for a while at least."

Old King Brady shrugged his shoulders.

"Pshaw! What's the use in having an island raised up for your especial benefit if you don't intend to use it for all it is worth? If we could only find food and water now; but I suppose that is not to be hoped for, since this land must have been at the bottom of the ocean for a long period of time."

"I don't know about that," exclaimed Tom, who had been staring about him. "There are springs at the bottom of the ocean. Do you see that big building yonder? Some one built it. May we not hope to find water near the ruins of a church?"

"At least we may try," replied Old King Brady. "As well seek for it near the church as elsewhere. We can postpone the examination of that wreck, if it is a wreck, until some other time."

Thus speaking, they turned aside from the desolate grove and started across the stretch of slimy, broken land which separated them from the church.

Now it was that Old King Brady made a pleasing discovery.

With every moment the mud was congealing under the fierce rays of the tropical sun; before long they might reasonably hope to tread upon solid ground.

Presently they entered what had once been another stretch of woodland.

Here the branches of trees had not experienced the same decay as in the grove. They were festooned with seaweed and wreck, while scattered beneath them were hundreds of fishes, with here and there a great turtle crawling around.

"Food, Mr. Brady! Fried fish, turtle soup and steaks, if we only had fire with which to cook them."

"That's easily provided, my boy. I have plenty of matches in my water-proof box, but fuel is another thing."

There they could do nothing, but at the church there was no telling what discoveries awaited them.

Tom, therefore, seized two of the gasping fishes—great red-scaled fellows of a kind unknown—and they traveled on, reaching the church at last.

It was a building of very considerable dimensions; sixty or seventy feet front and at least two hundred feet deep.

Originally it had been plastered, and the saturated lime and bricks were steaming away under the burning rays of the sun to that extent that from a distance one might have thought the building to be in flames.

The front wall had almost wholly fallen, but the side walls were standing to the height of about twenty feet. The interior plastering remained, and along the base could be traced painted ornamentation, figures of saints, Biblical scenes, and the like.

The interior of the building was encumbered with the ruins of the fallen roof; the floor, which had collapsed in the centre, presenting a miniature salt lake, in which fish in great number could be seen swimming about.

Behind the altar, upon which rested an enormous turtle, was a painted representation of the scenes of the crucifixion, the colors still standing forth with considerable brilliancy and the figures of life size.

Old King Brady crossed himself, reverently, and even Tom could not help being inspired by a certain sense of awe.

Who had built this desolate sanctuary?

Where were the hands which painted those sacred figures, which had erected that altar before the Lord to be defiled by the reptiles of the sea?

Presently the current of thought of the castaways changed, and their gloomy reflections were transformed into exclamations of joy.

This was the result of two discoveries.

First Tom found in the open space in front of the church a stone fountain from which fresh water flowed clear and sparkling, and almost at the same moment Old King Brady kicked from beneath a heap of rubbish which choked the main entrance to the church, a tin case, which, upon being opened, was found to contain ship's biscuit, a little moldy, perhaps, but a perfect godsend to them then.

Seating themselves upon the edge of the stone basin of the fountain, Tom having given his fish a fling which sent them flying into the sea, which washed the outer wall of the church, they ate and drank their fill.

"See," said Old King Brady, "how good a protecting Providence has been to us. In our last extremity relief comes so strangely that it will sound like a fairy story if we ever get home to tell it. This fountain is, no doubt, inexhaustible. By to-morrow the trees will be sufficiently dry to burn, and with plenty of fish and an abundance of water, what have we to fear?"

A plunge in the surf was the next thing in order, after which they resumed their upper garments and started back across the flats with the intention of investigating the singular mound which Old King Brady had taken to be the wreck of some ship.

As the old detective had predicted, they found the mud much harder than when they had passed that way before.

The nearer they approached the mound, too, the more distinctly its outlines took the form of a vessel's hull.

Yes, it was a ship and no mistake.

It lay half buried in the sand, with the stern somewhat raised and turned toward them.

"Tom!" cried Old King Brady, suddenly. "Tom, what was the name of the ship in which your piratical uncle sailed?"

"The name! Let me see. The Bluebird, was it not?"

"That's what the manuscript says. Remember, boy, the Bluebird went down in an earthquake on the shore of the island of Corpus Christo. There was a ruined church on the island, too, and—"

"Hurrah!" shouted Tom, suddenly, for his eye had followed the direction indicated by the detective's finger.

The finger pointed toward the stern of the wreck.

Upon it the simple legend, "Bluebird," could now be plainly seen, painted in white letters upon a black ground.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON A DESERT ISLAND.

"Tom Carleton! Oh, Tom!"

Back from the sandy shallows over which the breakers roared and tumbled, came, faintly:

"Hello! Hello!"

"The boy is having fine fun this morning," mused Old King Brady, as, seating himself upon a great block of stone which had once formed part of the wall of the church, he watched Tom, who came bounding over the shallows his body wet with the foaming surf and glistening in the sunlight.

"I only wish that I was his age and could enjoy this monotonous existence as he seems to enjoy it. It's a great change for a man like me to be thus suddenly snatched from the field of his usefulness and activity—a great change. Sometimes I wonder how I can endure it at all."

"Hello, Mr. Brady! Is the time up?"

"Ay, and more than up. It is ten minutes past eight."

"Time we got to work, then!" cried Tom, shaking himself like some great water dog, and with a force which sent the drops flying right and left.

"You don't know what you miss by not bathing every morning. But what's the programme for the day? Is it to be work in the church, or another trip to the wreck?"

"I think we ought to work the wreck to-day. As she lies, the Bluebird is liable to be carried off by any storm. That last one moved her very considerably, you know, and—"

"And we want to get all that is of any value to us out of her as soon as possible, eh? Well, perhaps you are right, though I must confess I would rather go treasure-hunting. For my part, I don't believe the old pirate craft will have a chance to move much more. The island is rising daily. If it keeps on the way it is going, first thing we know the Bluebird will be on top of a hill."

"Did you find that you could walk out much further than usual this morning?" inquired Old King Brady, busying himself at a fire, over which fish were frying in an iron pan, with a tremendous splutter.

"Oh, yes. A great deal further," replied Tom, who had begun to dress himself. "Where the water was over my head yesterday, this morning it is only up to my shoulders, and, as you know, I was careful to choose dead low water for my bath in each case."

"The island is certainly rising," said Old King Brady, as he turned the fish. "You recollect the first day we came to this spot, Tom, how you threw the two fish into the water over there where now is a beach not covered even at high tide. Yes, the island is rising, but I am certain that what we now see is but a small part of its original dimensions. Probably the convulsion which took it down broke it into several pieces. It would not greatly surprise me to see the other parts come up out beyond us somewhere, if we are unfortunate enough to be obliged to remain here another month."

"I shouldn't wonder a bit, Mr. Brady. Is breakfast ready?"

"All ready. These fish are done to a turn."

"And with plenty of ship's biscuit and prime claret to wash them down with, our breakfast will be a famous one. Let us eat it, Mr. Brady, and then get to work."

Six weeks had passed since the day of the tidal wave, and the condition of the castaways had materially changed.

Though alone upon a desert island, with the blue waters of the Spanish main all about them, many happenings had come as the days dragged by, until they had grown to expect from each succeeding day some fresh surprise.

First had come the discovery that the old wreck upon the beach was none other than the pirate ship Bluebird, in which, years before, Tom's uncle, Matthew Minnett, had sailed, and this brought with it the certainty that the island, which seemed to have been raised up for their particular benefit, was none other than the Corpus Christi told of in the manuscript taken from the red leather bag.

It was very wonderful.

Robbed of his legacy, buffeted about by fate, Tom Carleton now found himself unexpectedly thrown into the very posi-

tion which his treacherous cousin had sought to place himself, and which he had been strangely prevented from attaining in spite of all his schemes.

But was it fate?

Indeed it looked so.

Still of what avail was their mere presence on the island when they lacked the all-important paper which could reveal the precise location of the treasure as well as the means of leaving the island once the treasure was found?

Stay!

Let it be remembered that Tom had for his companion a man to whom, for years, fate had been very kind.

Three times already in this singular sequence of adventures had Old King Brady's luck brought them out of danger and difficulty.

Was it going to desert them now?

It is hard to foresee the future, and Old King Brady, with his accustomed energy, once he had grasped the situation, wasted no time in vain effort in the attempt, but went bravely to work to make the best out of their wretched situation that circumstances would allow.

First had come the exploration of the ship which had proved a most profitable undertaking, since it yielded them many things of which they stood greatly in need.

When first they boarded the Bluebird and began the examination of her hold and cabins, both Tom and the detective had expected to find ghostly evidence of her pirate crew.

In this they were disappointed.

Evidently all hands had been on shore when the earthquake struck the island, for not a single trace of a human being did they find.

The hold was filled with water, and the cabins were in the same condition; the vessel's timbers were covered with slime and barnacles, but having been under water were otherwise perfectly preserved.

In the galley an axe was discovered, and Old King Brady's first care had been to knock a large hole in the vessel's side, low down toward the keel which from the position in which she lay permitted the water to run out freely.

Then came the time to make a thorough exploration, which resulted in the discovery of an immense store of provisions, though for the most part entirely unfit for use.

There were some waterproof packages of ship's bread and other articles of food, however, numerous cases of wine and casks of spirits, and one or two barrels of beef and one of pork were found to be still in a condition to serve as food.

Besides these there were many useful articles discovered, cooking utensils, tools and the like.

One chest containing clothes was found wedged in a corner of what had been the captain's cabin, and carefully covered with a tarpaulin, was discovered to be but little injured, and having dried the garments in the sun, the castaways found them to be still in condition to serve as a change for their own.

Of evidence of the presence of the treasure on board the Bluebird they found none.

Still, even yet the examination of the bales, barrels and boxes, which the hold had contained, was by no means completed, for Tom and Old King Brady had appointed themselves other work to do.

Now that they knew to a certainty that they were on the island mentioned in the manuscript, the thought of the treasure was ever before them, and it is hardly to be expected that they would not make some effort to bring it to light.

Concerning the disposition of the treasure in a general way the manuscript had been most explicit.

It had been taken, said the writing, to the pirates' rendezvous on the island of Corpus Christi and concealed within the ruined church.

They were on the island of Corpus Christi, and under the shadow of the ruined church they had been sleeping nightly for six long weeks.

Still they had not found the faintest trace of the treasure, although they had toiled unceasingly with that object in view now for many days.

Every foot of the church had been examined, both inside and out, but with no result.

With great labor they had removed much of the rubbish from the interior, drained off the water from the floor, seeking in every direction for some secret apartment or hidden vault.

Evidently the church had been long in ruins; indeed, there was every evidence that its downfall dated far back of the sinking of the island as described by Matthew Minnett.

Probably the island had been subjected to many earthquakes, which would serve to account for its abandonment, and for the utter absence of any trace of the dwellings of the priests and natives which must once have clustered about the church.

"They were probably nothing but huts," explained Old King Brady one evening, while he and Tom were discussing the subject. "The church being the only stone edifice on the island, it alone has survived."

So they built themselves a rude shelter out of the stone from the ruined church; and with plenty of hard work and the hope of the treasure, daily watchings for some passing sail from the top of one of the towers, and trips of exploration about the island and to and from the ship, the days had passed.

Meanwhile, a great change had come over the appearance of the island.

Grass, shrubs and tropical plants were springing up in every direction; if they were to remain there much longer their wilderness bade fair to blossom as the rose.

But let us leave this long digression and return.

"Well, Mr. Brady, which is it to be, treasure hunting or a day's work over at the ship?" cried Tom, when breakfast was over.

"I thought," replied the detective, "that we had already decided that."

"That means work at the wreck, I suppose."

"I think we ought to do it. There's no telling what may happen. There are still many things in the hold of the bluebird which remain unexamined. There may be something discovered which would be of the greatest service to us in the present condition of affairs."

"Well, so be it, then. You get the tools ready, and I'll run up into the tower of the old church and see if I can spy a sail before we start."

"Do so; and before you come down again see that the signal is firmly secured. From the appearance of the sky I shouldn't wonder if it came up to blow before long."

Tom was off and back again before Old King Brady had restored the cooking utensils and articles of crockery to their proper places in the stone hut.

"Did you see anything?" he asked.

"Not a thing. It would seem that you and I are destined to live as hermits for the rest of our lives, Mr. Brady."

"Perhaps you are right, but if so, the greater the necessity of our making all we can out of the Bluebird. Come, my boy, let us be off."

If ever man and boy worked hard, Old King Brady and Tom Carleton worked hard that day.

As the morning advanced the cloud banks in the eastern horizon crept upward until by three o'clock the sky was completely obscured.

Still the wind did not rise as Old King Brady had expected; a strange, unwholesome calm seemed to have settled down upon them, there was a peculiar greenish-yellow appearance to the sky which seemed the forerunner of some awful event.

"I don't like the looks of things a bit," remarked Old King Brady, as he descended from the deck of the Bluebird into the hold, where Tom was working away, at a little after half-past four. "It looks like a storm of the worst kind, but it is holding off strangely. Just now there ain't a breath of air."

"There ain't much down here in this hold, at all events," answered Tom, who, stripped to the waist, was trying to drag a huge wooden chest into a position where he could attack it with his axe. "It's hotter than blazes, and since everything we've opened to-day has proved to be spoiled and useless, I give you fair warning, Mr. Brady, that as soon as I have broken into this chest I intend to strike."

"Better strike now," answered the detective. "I think we will be better off near the church in the little cove where we dragged our boat."

"You don't mean earthquake?" cried Tom, looking up with a somewhat startled air.

"That's what's in my mind, I frankly confess it."

"Thunder! What shall we do?"

"What can we do? We are here, like rats in a trap. Still, as a matter of precaution, I think we ought to be starting toward the boat."

"We'll go now," answered Tom, seriously, and throwing aside his axe he hastily pulled on his coat, and a few moments later saw them hurrying across the flats in the direction of the ruined church.

It grew darker and darker.

As they passed through the strip of forest a breath of air

as hot as the blast of some fiery furnace swept across their faces, and the wind sighed ominously through the leafless boughs.

"It's coming, Tom! It's coming, sure!" cried Old King Brady. "Run, boy, run! We must make the cove before it strikes."

On they dashed, passing out of the forest and ascending a little rise, which brought the church into full view.

Suddenly Tom Carleton stopped.

"Mr. Brady! Mr. Brady! Look there! Look there!" he cried, in startled accents, at the same time pointing toward the great doorway of the ruined church.

Old King Brady's gaze was instantly turned in the direction indicated.

To his intense amazement he beheld a man standing under the arch of the doorway.

Now, in itself, this was sufficiently startling, since both were well aware that no living soul existed upon the island save themselves.

How much more startling then must it have been for Old King Brady to recognize in the face turned toward him the countenance of his companion on the road to Sequaket.

Seen in the strange, lurid light which now surrounded them, the face looked pale and ghostly. Its owner did not appear to regard them at all, but to be looking off upon the sea.

Nevertheless, there was no mistaking it.

It was the face of Phineas Phipps!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE EVERLASTING MR. PHIPPS.

"What's the latitude, cap?"

"Eleven degrees and eight minutes north."

"And the longitude?"

"Exactly seventy-one."

"We ought to be right on top of it according to my calculation," muttered Crafton Wise, as he turned away from Captain Ronalds. "We ought to be right on top of it, and now just as we've reached the spot it's going to blow like time and send us way out of our course."

"Blow!" exclaimed the captain, who had overheard the observation. "You'll be precious lucky if there ain't something worse than a blow coming, if I'm any judge of the appearance of the sky. Tumble up there! Tumble up! Haul in everything! Don't leave a rag to catch the breeze!"

The last part of the captain's remarks were in Spanish, which was necessary, since the four men who constituted the crew of the little schooner Maria Perez understood no other tongue.

Again at sea! Still striving to accomplish his purpose.

It was so.

With the money recovered from the red leather bag, Wise had chartered the Maria Perez and engaged the services of a drunken English sea captain, who found himself lying about the slums of Aspinwall without a ship.

It was the best he could do, and he had done it.

Not that he hoped to accomplish more than to locate the exact position of the sunken island.

No more was to be looked for in his present situation.

The paper stolen by Phipps had perished with him.

Foiled in his purpose, Wise had even tried to discover the body of the unfortunate agent, but in vain.

Then in a rage he flung the red leather bag into the ditch, and thus another of the many dark chapters in this man's strange career came to an end.

Was he chasing a chimera—following an ignus fatuus which was destined to lure him to his death? Precisely this was the thought of Crafton Wise when, a moment later, a cry suddenly broke from the lips of Nicholas Nodine, who stood well forward, leaning over the rail, which sent all the warm blood rushing to his heart.

"Land ho! Land ho! Look, Craf! Look! There it is!"

"There is what?" shouted Wise, rushing forward.

"An island! See! If Captain Ronalds tells the truth, there should be no island anywhere near us; and yet——"

"Ye gods!" cried Wise. "Can it be that the recent earthquake has brought Corpus Christi to the surface again?"

"To the boats! To the boats!"

Still again the awful cry is heard.

Wreck upon wreck, disaster upon disaster.

Is such ever to be the fate of this man?

Some hours have passed.

Hope raised at noon has vanished with the descending sun.

A hurricane of unparalleled violence has crossed the path of the Maria Perez and she is a mastless wreck, buffeted about by the waves.

Still there remains hope.

The mysterious island, the very existence of which Captain Ronalds had at first been inclined to question, lies close before them now.

Vainly they had striven to reach it before the storm struck them, and now, huddled together in one leaky boat they pulled for a certain projecting sandy spot, with all their strength.

"Craf, does it not seem as though fate were against us? Look! There can be no doubt about its being Corpus Christi. The captain swears that no island exists in this latitude, and——"

"Doubt!" growled Wise. "Of course there is no doubt. Don't you see, there's the church. But what can it avail us now?"

Nick was silent; nor did Wise speak again, for, indeed, his voice could hardly make itself heard above the howling blast.

On and still on.

They struggled bravely.

The boat is a mere plaything at the mercy of the heaving waves.

The fury of a tropical storm is upon them. It would be a bold man who would venture to predict their escape.

"If we can only round that point we may be able to make a landing," growled the captain, between his set teeth.

To this end the rowers now bent all their efforts. The moments passed, and it was done.

Then a very singular thing came to pass; so singular that we have hardly courage to relate it here.

They had entered a little cove now, and right ahead of them rose the ruined church which had for hours been the one object of Wise's attention.

The instant—aye, the very instant—they passed the point, the wind suddenly ceased to blow and there fell upon them an awful calm.

Suddenly a strange, lurid light lit up the sky, the like of which the captain loudly declared he had never seen before.

It illuminated the heavens all about them, it caused the outlines of the church to stand out with startling distinctness.

They were close inshore now, and as Wise turned his gaze in the direction of the beach an awful cry escaped him.

"Look, Nick! Look! Heavenly Powers! Has that fiend come back to earth to lure us to destruction?"

It was only a man standing upon the beach and gazing curiously toward them.

Only a man!

That was all.

But the man was Phineas Phipps!

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE UNDERGROUND VAULTS BENEATH THE OLD CHURCH.

"Do you see him?"

"I saw him—I do not see him now."

"You are right, he has disappeared around the corner of the church. Great Scott! Mr. Brady, it looked for all the world like——"

"Like Phineas Phipps!" exclaimed Old King Brady, in a low tone, and before Tom had time to add a word the detective had rushed forward into the gloom which hung about the ancient church.

Tom Carleton followed with all the rapidity possible.

When first he had caught sight of the man he had been standing beneath the archway of the great central door looking off upon the sea.

But even as Tom had directed the attention of his companion toward him the figure seemed to glide forward into the open, and passing around the corner of the tower nearest the ocean disappeared.

What could it mean?

Surely it was impossible that any one could have landed on the island without their knowledge.

Such was Tom's first reflection, but as he hurried after Old King Brady he remembered that all day long they had been at the wreck on the other side of the island. A dozen ships might have landed in the little cove behind the church since morning without their being a bit the wiser—might have come and gone again.

Probably some such thought was uppermost in the mind of

Old King Brady as he went dashing around the corner of the tower.

If, however, he expected to see the tall masts of some vessel rising before him he was mistaken.

Not only was there nothing in sight except the sea and the sand, but the figure of Mr. Phipps had disappeared as well.

"Phipps! Phipps! Hello, there! Hello!" shouted the detective.

The wind which was now sweeping in from the sea with fearful force caught up his words and hurled them back in his teeth.

If Mr. Phipps had stood ten yards in front of him, he could not have heard; if he had stood twenty, Old King Brady could not have seen him, for each succeeding second had served to increase the darkness, already fully equal to that of night.

What could it mean?

Ghosts, Old King Brady scarcely believed in. Besides, let it be remembered, that of all that had happened to Mr. Phipps the detective knew nothing, had no reason to believe him dead.

"Mr. Brady! Mr. Brady!"

It was Tom Carleton calling.

He came running around the corner of the church holding something in his hand, with excitement written all over his face.

And that something was?

Well, nothing but an old hunting-bag of red leather, torn and battered.

Was not that enough?

Indeed, it was.

"The red leather bag!" ejaculated Old King Brady. "Then what we saw was flesh and blood, after all, and not—run, Tom! It is upon us at last! Run for your life!"

Not Mr. Phipps—not the ghost, but the storm.

It seemed as though all the reservoirs of heaven had been suddenly let loose above their heads.

The wind howled madly, the waves beat upon the sand with ominous pounding, while the rain came pouring down through the darkness in one vast sheet.

With one accord Tom Carleton and Old King Brady dashed around the tower and into the church.

From the fury of such a storm their rude hut offered no shelter. The church was roofless; there was but one place for them now, the chancel behind the altar, on the walls of which was painted the scenes of the crucifixion already described.

Here the broad, arching roof remained perfect, and once they stood beneath it they found themselves at least shielded from the rain.

"My stars! One would fancy that the last day was upon us," panted Old King Brady. "If it was really a man we saw out there, he must be drowned by this time. Speak, Tom, where did you find that bag?"

"Saw it lying upon a stone just inside the church door," replied Tom, excitedly. "Mr. Brady, what does all this mean?"

"Don't ask me. Are you sure that it is actually the red leather bag bequeathed to you by your uncle?"

"Look for yourself and see," answered Tom, holding up the bag.

There, sure enough, was the name Matthew Minnett upon it.

It was very amazing.

Puzzle his brains about the matter as he would, Old King Brady could make nothing of it.

Yet he had certainly seen Mr. Phipps—they had both seen him.

Moreover, there was the bag.

Dark as it was inside the chancel, there was still light enough to enable them to distinguish objects at short range.

Old King Brady now took the bag and opened it.

Tom bent forward, eagerly.

To their added astonishment a folded paper lay inside.

Thrusting in his hand, Old King Brady drew forth the paper.

It was covered with writing so fine and close that to read it was impossible in the gloom which surrounded them, still it was easily seen that the writing closely resembled that upon the sheets already in their possession—that it was the handwriting of old Matthew Minnett himself.

"Can you make it out?" asked Tom.

"No, I can't. Here, you take it—your eyes are younger

than mine. Positively of all the mysteries it has ever been my lot to encounter this is the best."

"I can't read it, either," answered Tom, peering at the paper. "Suppose you strike a match."

Old King Brady, in response, slung the strap of the red leather bag about his neck and drew out his match-box.

He was just about to open it when all at once the sound of hurried footsteps fell upon their ears, advancing along the church floor.

The detective grasped Tom's arm with a grip like a vise.

"Back, back into the niche!" he whispered. "There is some one coming. Not a word! Not a sound. But a moment now and we shall know with whom we have to deal."

There was behind them a deep niche sunk in the chancel wall, where in some former time a statue had perhaps stood.

Now it was vacant and so completely in the shadow that if they remained quiet there was but little risk of their being seen.

The footsteps drew nearer and nearer.

Now some one was coming up the steps alongside the altar an instant later, and a man stood upon the spot they had just left.

It was Mr. Phipps.

Even in the gloom Old King Brady fully recognized him.

He was thin and pale, shabbily dressed, and dripping from head to foot.

"The bag! What can have become of the bag?" they heard him mutter. "Heavens! what a storm. Suppose it brings wreck at sea, and I am doomed to remain for the rest of my life on this horrible island? I'm sure I laid the bag on the stone, outside there. Can my first suspicions be correct and the island inhabited? To be robbed of my reward now would be beastly, after all I have gone through."

Old King Brady and Tom looked and listened in amazement. Twice Tom would have moved forward but for the detective's restraining pressure upon his arm.

For a moment Mr. Phipps stood irresolute.

"Pshaw! I can't understand it, and I'm not going to try," they heard him mutter. "I remember the reading of the paper, perfectly. Here is the chancel, there is the picture, and already I have proved that the secret vaults exist. I may as well penetrate them now, for while this rain lasts I am sure to be undisturbed."

Then to the astonishment of the watchers, the agent advanced toward the part of the wall upon which was painted the scene of the crucifixion.

A life-size figure of Mary Magdalene, standing beneath the cross, was now beside him, and without the slightest hesitation he raised his hand and pressed upon the figure's left eye.

Wonder of wonders!

The figure moved suddenly inward, and at the same instant Mr. Phipps appeared to vanish from their sight.

For a full minute neither spoke.

Then Tom, who could restrain himself no longer, tore away from the grasp of the detective and started forward, with a bound.

"Hush! Restrain yourself!" whispered Old King Brady, leaping after him and once more clutching his arm.

"Let me go! You saw! That man knows the secret!"

"Patience! A moment and we will follow. Perhaps he means to come back."

For an instant they remained motionless, listening.

There was the rattle of the rain upon the stone pavement of the old church, the howling of the wind, the pounding of the surf on the beach without, but no other sound reached their ears.

"Come!" whispered Old King Brady at last. "We will follow, but remember—we are unarmed."

He strode across the chancel, Tom Carleton following.

Where the figure of Mary Magdalene had been, a low, narrow doorway now stood open.

Old King Brady thrust his head inside.

A flight of stone steps was visible inside the door, and at a considerable distance below a light could be distinguished flitting from side to side and moving further down.

"Shall we risk it?" whispered the detective. "It is for you to say."

"I say, yes."

An instant later and they were softly descending the steps. Down, down, and still down.

Thirty—forty—fifty steps Tom had counted, when all at once the light was seen to stop and then flash to the right and the left.

Old King Brady caught Tom's arm again and stopped him.

"Watch!" he whispered. "If the fellow is alone we can surely manage him. If there are others, we had better have a care."

"But where in the world do you suppose he dropped from?" breathed Tom.

"You ask me too much. I—but, hush! he is moving forward again."

It was true.

As they looked below them they now beheld the light flashing upon two horizontal passages, which appeared to have been hollowed out of the solid rock, one leading off to the right, the other to the left.

Which passage to take seemed, in the mind of the man below them, to be a matter of doubt.

Presently, however, he chose the left-hand passage, and passing beneath its arch the light vanished in an instant, leaving Tom and the detective enshrouded in darkness the most profound.

"Come on!" whispered Old King Brady.

And together they hurried down the steps.

Presently they gained the landing and again caught sight of the light, not retreating along the left-hand passage as they had expected to see it, but coming toward them rapidly, the click of Mr. Phipps' bootheels upon the stone floor of the passage being audible as well.

"Stand back!" whispered Old King Brady. "For some reason he is returning. I am going to grab him now, Tom. This has gone far enough."

They drew back into the shadow.

Nearer and nearer came the footsteps, and presently the insurance agent was seen emerging from the passage, carrying a dark-lantern in his hand.

"I chose the wrong road, confound it!" Tom heard him mutter. "That passage leads bunk up against a wall, and so much time lost. Now for the other, and—help! murder! Oh, good heavens!"

With a sudden rush, Old King Brady had leaped from his concealment and seized Mr. Phipps by the arm.

The result was not what had been expected.

Dropping the lantern, with the cry just quoted, the agent fled along the right-hand passage, shouting wildly for help.

"Quick!" cried Old King Brady, seizing the lantern and springing after him.

On they dashed through the right-hand passage.

Presently the cries of Mr. Phipps ceased, though the noise of his retreating footsteps could still be heard.

"Hurry! hurry!" exclaimed Old King Brady. Then raising his voice, aloud, he shouted:

"Hello! Hold on, there! We are friends! Hold on!"

There was no response.

At the same instant they reached a point where the passage divided in twain.

Which road had Mr. Phipps chosen?

Doubtful, and hearing no sound now, Old King Brady chose to still keep to the right.

They had not advanced a dozen yards before they found further progress obstructed by an iron door.

Without a word, Old King Brady seized the handle of the door and pulled upon it.

There was a creaking of rusty hinges, and then the door moved slowly outward.

Thrusting his lantern forward, its rays rested upon something yellow and glittering, lying at the foot of a flight of steps.

At the same instant a strong gust of wind swept across their faces.

In a twinkling the light was extinguished and the iron door closed behind them with a resounding slam.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE EVERLASTING MR. PHIPPS.

"Gentlemen, spare me! Spare me, for the love of heaven!"

Prostrate upon the earth before the door of the old church, on the island of Corpus Christi, lay the everlasting Mr. Phipps.

About him bent Crafton Wise, with drawn pistol. Nick was holding him down. Captain Ronalds and his boat's crew stood gathered around.

When Wise and his companions had first discovered the agent standing on the beach, the boat had not been ten yards distant from the shore.

He did not seem to mind them, but stood gazing out

upon the ocean, never changing his position until the keel grated upon the sand.

Then he saw and heard as well.

With a sharp cry of terror he turned just in time to see Wise leap on shore and, without waiting an instant, dashed off in the direction of the church.

"Stop! stop! or I'll put a ball in your back!" shouted Wise, dashing after him. "Heavens, Nick, it is the man, and alive!"

And without even pausing to explain to his astonished companions, Wise rushed on after the flying form of Mr. Phipps.

All followed.

Nick, who was the fleetest of foot, even passed his friend.

Contrary to his threat, Wise did not use his revolver.

Three minutes more and the agent was overtaken by Nick, who flung himself upon him just as he would have sprung through the door of the church.

"Speak! How came you here? Where is that paper?" roared Wise, who seemed to have lost all control of himself. "This time you shall not escape me, for——"

"Hush!" whispered Nick, suddenly rising. "You forget that we are not alone."

"I forget nothing. We are here on the island, though Heaven knows how the island came to be above water. This man——"

"Stop! stop! Craf, you are making a fool of yourself. If you have any control over your temper, exercise it now."

He seized the arm of the trembling agent and roughly raised him as he spoke.

Meanwhile, the others—none of whom save Captain Ronalds had the least inkling of the nature of the errand which had brought them to the island, stood looking wonderingly on.

"Back to the boat, men!" said Nick, firmly. "This business is private. Captain, we will explain later on."

He still grasped the arm of the agent, and now drew him inside the church, Wise following.

"Speak now!" he said. "What brings you here—you, whom we believed to be dead?"

"I came because I chose to come," was the short and sullen answer. "If I am not dead it is no fault of yours."

"Here, we have no time for parley," cried Wise, suddenly. "Phipps, look at me!"

"Well?"

"Why do you persist in crossing our path at every turn?"

"I—I don't persist. It has been no choice of mine. It is fate."

"Then it is fated that I shall shoot you inside of five minutes, if you don't instantly reveal all you know."

"I—I'll do it. Would to heaven I had never been thrown into this business at all."

"What brought you here?"

"A schooner."

"Where is the schooner?"

"Gone."

"Be more definite, confound you!" cried Wise, angrily. "Have you the paper? Is this the island of Corpus Christi? Have you discovered the treasure or not?"

"You ask me too many questions at once," replied Phipps, trembling violently. "All I want now is to have my life spared to me. I have not discovered the treasure, and I have not got the paper, but I can put you in the way of getting at both, I think, if you promise no to shoot."

"Now?"

"At any moment."

"Then lead on."

"Hadn't we better wait till morning?" interposed Nick. "Ronalds is in this business, you know, and may cut up rusty if he thinks we are trying to get the best of him; besides, there's the crew."

"We'll deal with them afterward. Do you suppose I've risked all I have risked in this business to delay now that the moment has come? Phipps, do as you have promised. Fail me and I'll fix you!"

How strangely still it had grown!

Not a sound—not a breath of air stirring, while above them, between the roofless walls of that ancient sanctuary, the heavens were illuminated with that singular greenish light.

Into the chancel and through the secret door Phipps now led them, without speaking a word.

His trembling lips and pallid countenance betokened his terror, which seemed to increase as they descended the stone steps.

At the bottom he suddenly paused and motioned toward the right-hand passage.

They were provided with a torch in the shape of a stick of some resinous wood, which Nick, by great good fortune, had been able to find in a condition sufficiently dry for burning, in one corner of the chancel, and which he now held raised above their heads.

"I—it's down that way somewhere," stammered Phipps, "but don't make me go any further, gentlemen—don't, for the love of Heaven!"

"Go on!" cried Wise, roughly, pushing him forward.

"B-but, I have not b-b-been there. I have never seen the treasure. There is some one else down there now, and I—I'm afraid!"

"Some one else! What do you mean?" demanded Wise, seizing his arm and dragging him hurriedly into the right-hand passage. "Speak up, quick! No shilly shallying now."

"I—I don't know who it is. I was in here—some one sprang upon me—my light—oh! I can't go any further, and I won't!"

He tore himself from the grasp of Wise, and would have fled had not Nick leaped across his path.

"Catch him by the neck, Craf. Run him on, whether he wants to go or not!" he exclaimed. "We are good for—oh, my Lord!"

A light had suddenly burst upon them from the depths of the passage.

There, motionless, facing them, stood an old man and another who, by the side of his companion, looked to be but a boy.

The man grasped a small dark-lantern in one hand and held an immense golden candlestick in the other; a hunting-bag of red leather hung at his side; the boy carried two candlesticks just as big and a host of bright-yellow gold, richly studded with gems, besides.

A hoarse cry broke from the lips of Crafton Wise.

"Tom Carleton! Old King Brady! Has all the world gone mad!"

CHAPTER XXII.

IS IT AN EARTHQUAKE SHOCK?

As the iron door went slamming back into its place behind Old King Brady and Tom Carleton, at the end of the right-hand passage, a strong current of air swept across their faces, extinguishing the light, as we have said.

Old King Brady felt Tom clutch his arm in the darkness.

"Oh, Mr. Brady!" he whispered, "what are we going to do now?"

"Light the lantern," replied the old detective, quietly. "I still have a few matches remaining in my waterproof safe, thank goodness, and if I can only find out how this confounded thing works—be careful—be careful! If you move about in that fashion you'll stumble down those stairs next. It would not be pleasant to break your neck even by falling on a bed of gold."

"Do you think what we saw glittering down there was actually gold?" queried Tom, as the lantern flashed forth its light again.

"I don't think—I know it. I have seen too much of the precious metal in my time to be deceived on that score. We have discovered the treasure at last. Now to see if we have been penned in by the sudden closing of that door, and then—hark! friend Phipps has come to life again. Don't you hear him running away?"

He had thrown himself against the iron door while speaking, which yielded as readily as before.

Back in the darkness of the underground passage the echo of retreating footsteps could be distinctly heard.

And Old King Brady was quite right in his surmise.

It was Mr. Phipps running away as fast as his cowardly legs could carry him.

That he fled from a supposed enemy only to encounter a real one, jumped from an imaginary frying-pan into a real fire, has been already shown, and thus it had been with the agent of the Great Universal Cosmopolitan from the first.

Deep designs? He was incapable of it. Courage to encounter the dangers through which he had until now safely passed? He did not possess the courage of a mouse.

It was all accident—pure accident—with the sole exception of his presence on the island of Corpus Christi, which was due—but we must not anticipate; let matters develop in their proper course.

"I ought to follow him," mused Old King Brady. "The rascal may fasten that secret panel behind us; but as he

must reach it long before I could hope to overhaul him, we will have to take our chances, Tom. The treasure is in our hands, at all events. Now to see what good fortune fate has sent."

He turned abruptly and flashed the lantern down the steps.

A cry of amazement burst from Tom Carleton's lips.

They were gazing into a veritable treasure-vault, a curious, cave-like apartment, hollowed by the hand of man from out of the solid rock.

A flight of five stone steps led down to it, at the bottom of which lay piled, in reckless confusion, gold and silver ornaments of every description, thrown carelessly one upon another over the entire floor.

Candlesticks, radiant hosts, cups and chalices, communion plate, rich vestments, strange ornaments, the uses of which even Old King Brady was ignorant. Everywhere, glittering gold—flashing gems.

Together they descended, and for many moments stood in speechless wonder, contemplating the wealth which lay exposed to their gaze.

"Stolen gold! Stolen gold!" murmured Old King Brady. "There's blood on every ounce of it—there's a curse with every gem."

Was he right?

During the time which followed, Tom Carleton many times had reason to think so, and yet, as the sequel proved, it was to the treasure that they were to owe their lives.

Carried away by the excitement of their discovery, time slipped by before they were aware of its passage; for besides the church plate there were several chests which they stopped to examine, easily tearing the lids from their rusty fastenings and finding them in each instance to be filled with gold and silver coins.

These chests, which were ranged together along the furthest end of the vaults, suggested the thought that it had been used by the pirates as a repository for their ill-gotten wealth before the sacking of the church at Guayaquil, as described in the papers left by Matthew Minnett.

"Come!" exclaimed Old King Brady, at last, "we must get back at once. We can accomplish nothing now. First, to make our way out of this hole, then to learn the meaning of the unexpected appearance of that man Phipps. We'll take a few samples of our find with us that we may see how they look in the light of day."

As he spoke, Old King Brady picked up one of the golden candlesticks and moved toward the stairs.

Passing the point where the second separation of the passage occurred, their ears were suddenly greeted with the sound of footsteps descending the stairs.

"Tom Carleton! Old King Brady! Has all the world gone mad!" spoke a familiar voice, as a flashing torch revealed not only Phineas Phipps, but their old enemies, "Nick" and Crafton Wise!

"Gentlemen," said Old King Brady, "I warn you that we are prepared to resist any interference. Stand aside and let us pass."

"I refuse to obey," replied the villain, grimly. "Once I spared your life, Brady, as well as the life of my milk-sop cousin, Tom Carleton, when I might have taken both had I so chosen. I thought you safe on your way to Australia, but it seems that again you have crossed my path. You have found the pirates' treasure! Then, by heavens, you must fight to keep it. Upon 'em, Nick! No fooling this time! Ah, you would, would you? You puling coward, take that!"

"Save me, Mr. Brady! Save me! Oh, save me from those fiends!"

Thus shrieking, the little insurance agent suddenly wrenched his arm from the grasp of Nick, made one dive along the passage toward Old King Brady and Tom.

"Bang! Bang!"

With a quick movement, Wise drew his revolver and sent two shots crashing after him.

One went whizzing past the head of Old King Brady as the explosion awoke the echoes, the other appeared to have accomplished the errand on which it was sent.

"Oh, I'm killed! I'm dead!" roared the wretched man. "Save me, Mr. Brady! Save—"

His speech remained uncompleted; staggering forward, Mr. Phipps fell prostrate at Old King Brady's feet.

At the same moment a deep and ominous rumble woke the echoes once more and a strong current of air went whirling past their faces, extinguishing in an instant both lantern and torch.

An awful cry rang out through the darkness.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CONCLUSION.

What had happened?

It would have been useless to question Old King Brady as he lay there in the dense darkness, for he could not have told.

A strange, grinding, crunching, crushing noise was audible, mingled with which came groans from Mr. Phipps.

Now that it was light, Tom Carleton could see that Old King Brady was on his knees, telling his beads.

Phineas Phipps lay face downward upon the stone, groaning piteously.

Lost in wonder, Tom sprang to his feet and stared about him.

He found himself standing at the entrance to a cave looking off upon the sea—looking where the island had been, but was not now.

"Look! look!" he cried, pulling off his old felt hat and waving it frantically.

"Look, Mr. Brady! They see us! They see us! A sail! Thank heaven, a sail!"

"It is my opinion," said Inspector Molloy, as he sat late upon a certain afternoon in his office at police headquarters, talking with that world-renowned taker of criminals, Monte, the French detective, "it is my opinion, Monte, that we have both seen the last of an old friend, so far as this world is concerned. The burning of the ship *Magdalena* was to-day announced on 'Change as a certainty. If the information acquired by you from that old fisherman in Sequaket was correct, and he was actually delivered on board the ill-fated ship, then it is hoping against hope to hope any longer. We may as well resign ourselves to the inevitable, Monte. Old King Brady is numbered among—"

"The living, not dead!" spoke a deep voice behind the inspector, who, springing from his chair in amazement, beheld, standing in the doorway, the object of his thoughts.

"Not dead, gentlemen," repeated Old King Brady, calmly, "though, positively, I feel that I ought to be, for I owe my life to a miracle, if ever a man did in this world."

Then Old King Brady told his story.

"But," said the inspector, after listening to the old detective's story, "there is one important particular which still remains unexplained. You have told us how the earthquake came in the very nick of time to save you from your enemies; how it tore the island of Corpus Christi all to pieces, dividing it in the middle of the secret passage leading to the treasure-vault, and again, beyond, carrying away half the vault and leaving you three safely perched upon the only part which remained above the waves."

"You have told us all this, Brady, and I am free to confess that it is a most remarkable story, but you have not told us how Mr. Phipps, here, came upon the island in the first instance. Do you intend for us to understand that he hides wings under that brown coat of his, or that he dropped down upon you from the clouds?"

Old King Brady smiled.

Tom Carleton glanced at the insurance agent and laughed.

"By no means," answered the detective, quietly. "As I was saying to my friends here, as we rode up from the steamer, I am fully prepared to have doubt cast upon my marvelous story, but the part which you seem inclined to question, although I confess it was very puzzling to us at the time is, as a matter of fact, the most easily accounted for of all."

"Friend Phipps is no better supplied in the matter of flying than ordinary mortals, nor did he drop down upon us from the clouds."

"When that scoundrelly fellow, Wise flung him down the bank into the ditch on the Isthmus of Panama, for the second time, Mr. Phipps managed to grasp the limb of an overhanging tree, and thus support himself until the coast was clear, when he crawled out not a bit the worse."

"He was without money or friends; he had cashed the draft not for his own benefit, but with the intention of returning that much of the spoil to the insurance companies; but finding himself deprived even of that resource, was now in a desperate fix indeed."

"Then it was that he fell in with the captain of a schooner whom he had formerly known, who was about to sail for the Venezuelan coast; and feeling some interest in the matter of the pirate's treasure which had caused him

so much suffering, and ascertaining from the captain that he would stop at the island of Fortalia, twenty miles distant from Corpus Christi——"

"I persuaded him to take me along," interrupted Mr. Phipps, suddenly taking up the conversation, "and he did so. When we discovered Corpus Christi above the water when we had supposed it to be at the bottom of the ocean, I was determined to land, for still having the paper found in the red leather bag, I had resolved to seek for the treasure myself."

"Captain Hedges tried to make a landing, but could not on account of the shallows, so he put me ashore in a small boat, went on to Fortalia and returned to find the island gone and myself, with Old King Brady and Mr. Carleton, perched upon a rock in the middle of the sea."

The inspector opened his eyes to their widest extent.

Monte, with a suppressed "Humph!" lit a fresh cigar.

"Better not publish that yarn, Brady," said the latter.

Fortunately for my readers, Monte's suggestion was not adopted; otherwise this remarkable tale would have been lost to the world.

Publish it! Why should Old King Brady not publish it?

Go down to the Marine Exchange and you will find recorded the burning of the *Magdalena*, and the wreck of the *Seraphina* and *Susan*; though, of course, the fate of the *Raven* is not mentioned since she was a clandestine craft.

Go up to the rooms of the American Geographical Society and you may read in their records a full description of the remarkable earthquakes in Venezuela and the Antilles on the very day the breaking up of the island of Corpus Christi occurred.

"Not much of a detective story, though," did we hear some one remark?

Very true; but that was not the fault of Old King Brady.

He started out from the office of the Eagle Insurance Company to solve a mystery. When next he entered it he was not only in a position to positively swear to the death of Nicholas Nodine, but also that of Crafton Wise, alias Joe Blackwell.

This time Nodine was actually dead—who could doubt it.

His body, however, did not repose at the bottom of Sequaket creek, but in the depths of the Caribbean Sea.

Thus ended the chapter so far as the insurance companies were concerned.

And the pirate's treasure?

There was but little of it remaining.

When the earthquake came it split the island of Corpus Christi into three parts.

With one part—by many times the largest—sank the old church and that portion of the secret passage in which were Nick and Wise, probably—for they were never seen again—taking down Captain Ronalds and his boat's crew as well.

With another, fully one-half the treasure vault went down, while to the fact that the third and smaller part remained Old King Brady and his companions owed their escape.

Still they saved something. The chests of money were gone, but much of the church plate remained.

Old King Brady would not touch a penny of it, although when it came to be melted up there was realized from it \$100,000 all told.

Of this sum the captain and crew of the schooner which had rescued them demanded and obtained a full half.

Of what remained, Tom took two-thirds, giving Mr. Phipps—who, by the way, had been but slightly injured—as a recompense for his part in the discovery of the treasure, one-third.

Will some future convulsion in those wild, tropical regions ever bring the remainder of the treasure to light?

It is doubtful; nor does Tom Carleton require it, for with his portion he engaged in business, and is now in a fair way to make a fortune for himself.

"If the other half of the cave lay open at my feet I would not use the wealth it contains for my own purposes," said Old King Brady. "I want no gold that's stained with crime."

But, then, Old King Brady was rich already, and that made a difference.

One thing only he has kept as a memorial of these strange adventures by land and sea.

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